to eternity

By: rumiberri

Homura, Madoka, and the process of letting go. [Super AU!][Homura-centric]

Rated: Fiction T - English - [Madoka K., Homura A.] - Words: 10,326 - Reviews: 8 - Favs: 20 - Follows: 7 - Published: Ma

"...I'm so sorry, Homura-chan, because of the nature of your wish, the strings of fate have tied us together so tightly...I can't change your wish without changing my own..."

They both know what she means and they both know her mind is already made up; there is no option of turning back.

"...Then take me with you, Madoka."

Hesitance and a spark of happiness is quickly pushed down; she's a Goddess now, she can't be selfish.

"...Are you sure, Homura-chan? I..."

Hands reach over and cover her own.

"You said that you've seen everything—all the timelines and lifetimes I have been through. Do you think I would even let you disappear without me, Madoka?"

She smiles to herself, already knowing the answer yet hearing it said brings tears to her eyes all the same.

"...Thank you, Homura-chan... For everything that you have done..."

Hands grip her tighter and she's gifted with the rare sight of Homura smiling.

"Let's go, Madoka. To wherever you need to be."

"Mm... let's go Homura-chan. To our new home."

A flash of light and then they are gone.

/

"Homura-chan~ I'm back."

Slim fingers slip a bookmark through the pages and lavender eyes peering through red rimmed glasses glance up.

"Welcome back, Madoka."

"Mm," Madoka makes a noncommittal noise and quickly joins her at the small table in the middle of the room, the ends of her white gown trailing in after her.

"Would you like some tea?" Homura asks even as she places her book down and moves to stand.

"That's okay," Madoka tells her, waving her off. "I can get it myself.." She makes no effort to do so however, and places her head onto the table. "Maybe after I rest for a bit..."

"Mmhmm," Homura replies and without missing a beat, continues her walk over to the kitchen in the back of their room to prepare the tea and an accompanying snack.

With her eyes closed, Madoka can hear the gentle tinkling of dishware as Homura putters about and a content smile washes over her face.

She's half asleep when she hears something placed besides her head and eyes open to stare at a steaming cup of tea and a giant slice of strawberry cake.

Childish excitement manages to push away her weariness and she sits up with a small grin as she reaches for the fork.

"Itadakimasu!" she says before she quickly cuts into the cake. Her eyes close as she savors the first bite. "Mmm...you've gotten a lot better, Homura-chan. I think your skills are up to par with Mami-san's now," she mumbles as her eyes open so that she can continue to shovel the sweet dessert into her mouth.

Homura shrugs lightly, letting the compliment bounce off her. "I have had plenty of time to learn." She watches as Madoka all but inhales her cake and reaches for her novel. "There's more, if you'd like?"

Madoka licks her fork clean, finishing the last piece and then shakes her head. "No, that's okay. You can send it over to the kitchens for the others to try."

"...Are you sure?" Homura asks, tilting her head slightly. She knows that strawberry is Madoka's favourite.

"Mmhmm," Madoka agrees as she finally reaches for her tea and takes a sip. "You're making something else, aren't you?" she asks, grinning widely. "Smells like chocolate... maybe toffee..."

"...Yes."

"Need to save room for that. It's—"

They both feel it, the tug from far and beyond and Madoka quickly sets her cup down.

"Save me a slice, okay?" Madoka reminds her as she rises to her feet.

"Of course."

"I'll be back, Homura-chan."

"Have a safe trip, Madoka."

Homura watches as Madoka vanishes into nothing and like always, her heart clenches slightly before she slowly relaxes and reminds herself that Madoka will be back soon.

She thumbs open her book, fingers gently brushing against the red ribbon that lays across the middle before eyes search for where she had left off.

/

"...Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?" she glances up from her book, a different one this time, and can see Madoka fidgeting with the dishware on the table. Goddess or not, she still had habits of 'Kaname Madoka' and Homura can see and feel the hesitance coming off of her in waves.

Something she hasn't seen in a while.

"...What's wrong?"

"Mm... It's just..." Madoka shakes her head and the nervousness disappears just as sudden. "...Are you really happy here, Homura-chan?"

The book is gently lowered to the table, red ribbon marking her place before she closes it with a snap. It's a question she has heard before—many times in fact, but it has been a while since she has been asked this and her brows furrow lightly.

"...Did you visit them again?"

Madoka flinches, ever so slightly but Homura sees it because she sees everything about Madoka and she readjusts her glasses before sighing softly.

"Madoka... of course I'm happy here."

"But..." she glances up but blinks when she finds Homura half out of her seat and a finger is pressed into her lips.

"No buts," Homura tells her with a frown. "I am happy here because Madoka is here. Wherever you are is where I want to be; to be able to stay with you for eternity is more than a wish come true." She gently removes her finger and sits back down.

Despite all her knowledge and the fact that she's supposed to be a Goddess, Madoka feels something warm bubble in her chest and she finds herself unable to stop the blush on her cheeks.

"...Homura-chan really says some embarrassing things sometimes," she mumbles.

Picking back up her book, Homura glances at her before nodding. "Because Madoka is stubborn and won't believe me unless I say things like that."

Madoka looks up at her and suddenly there's a smile on her face as she laughs lightly. "Homura-chan... you're too cute sometimes."

This manages to throw the usual stoic girl off balance and Madoka grins wider when she notices Homura deliberately holding the book too close to her face; she can see the red on the tips of Homura's ears however.

"Homura-chan?"

"Hm..."

"I—"

There is it again and Madoka barely holds back her pout. "I'll tell you later."

"...Have a safe trip, Madoka."

"Mm... I'll be back, Homura-chan."

The room always feels empty when she leaves and Homura stares at the now vacant spot for a while longer before finally lowering her novel.

"Madoka... are you happy?"

Her quiet question is left unanswered as the walls whisper nothing around her.

\\

When she glides through the doorway of their room, her greeting dies on her lips as she notices the sleeping figure curled next to the table. A discarded novel lays at her side and her dark black hair is pooled around her, a sharp contrast against her white dress and her expression is peaceful as she sleeps.

Once Madoka settles in next to her, she gently brushes her fingers across her cheeks and forehead. Red rimmed glasses are plucked off for better access and the reaction is almost instant. Lavender eyes flutter open, unfocused as she peers up in confusion.

"Morning, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, voice almost teasing.

The stare lasts for a whole minute, neither side relenting, before Homura blinks and she finally remembers.

She sits up quickly, Madoka moving to accommodate her as she tries to locate her glasses.

"Here, Homura-chan," the familiar glasses are slipped back into place and her eyes quickly adjust to the thick lenses.

"When did you get back?" Homura asks as she struggles to clear the sleepiness from her mind.

"Mm, just a little bit ago."

Homura nods though Madoka can see that her mind is still trying to catch up.

"Would you like some tea?" she mumbles softly.

Madoka smiles. She always did like catching Homura off-guard. It was the only time the real Homura, the one that she had met so many timelines ago, would finally show herself.

"Actually, a nap doesn't sound too bad."

Homura nods. "I already made the beds so—"

"Nope," Madoka tells her as she moves closer and slips her arms around Homura's thin waist. "A nap right here sounds good."

Before Homura can protest, Madoka pulls her down and they both share the one pillow that she had occupied earlier.

"M-Madoka...?"

The nervousness in Homura's voice makes Madoka hold her tighter.

"Hmmm?"

"..."

Madoka shifts lightly, making herself comfortable and sighs softly as her eyes close.

"Madoka...?"

"Hmmm?"

"...Welcome back."

"I'm back, Homura-chan."

/

"Ahh, a place with anything we can ask for yet why am I not surprised to see you off by your lonesome self?"

A brief glance is her only acknowledgement before she reaches over and turns the page.

"Hey heyyy, I went through all the trouble of trying to find you and this is how you greet me?"

"...Miki Sayaka."

"Yo!" the familiar tomboy gives her a playful salute and a wink which Homura promptly ignores, earning her an exasperated sigh. "Even after all this time, still the same old anti-social transfer student. You'd think spending eternity with Madoka would loosen you up a bit..."

She flips the page again. "...Did you need something, Miki Sayaka."

"Heyyy now," her voice sounds a lot closer, "after so long, I think it's about time we started calling each other more informally, don't you think? You can call me 'Sayaka-chan.'"

"..."

"And I'll call you 'Homura-chan.'"

"...Please don't."

Sayaka grins and takes a seat across from her at the table. "Really? But it kind of suits you, don't you think? Shy and clumsy Homura-chan... those glasses of yours just reminded me how you used to be. Where's that adorable Homura-chan hm? Did the scary Homura hide her somewhere?"

The book is snapped shut and placed onto the floor. "...Would you like some tea?"

Sayaka blinks at her in surprise and then shrugs. "Sure."

"There's cake as well," Homura informs her as she stands.

"Did Homura-chan take a page from Mami-san?" Sayaka smirks at her as she leans back against her arms.

Homura hesitates before answering. "...It reminds Madoka of home."

"Ah..." Sayaka watches her thoughtfully as Homura expertly maneuvers over to the kitchen and in a few minutes, a cup of tea and a slice of carrot cake is slipped in front of her. "Thanks."

Homura nods and reclaims her usual seat.

"This is pretty good," Sayaka tells her after she takes a few bites. "Is there someone here in charge of the food? How does that even work here?"

"There's a master kitchen that everyone has access to though you can request a kitchen for your own room if you prefer. Meals are taken whenever but most of the girls here tend to follow a set schedule. I'm not sure how that works however, you'll have to ask Madoka about that."

"Huh," Sayaka says as she reaches for her tea. "Why am I not surprised you still don't play nice with the others?" She takes a sip before turning back to her cake.

Homura shifts her shoulders slightly in a half shrug. "I have no reason to communicate with anyone else."

Sayaka points a fork at her though she immediately pulls it back when she notices a piece of cream on it falling off. "Whoops. Tissue, tissue."

Homura watches as she cleans her mess and pushes the used napkins to the side.

"Anyways, as I was saying, you should be more friendly, you know? Spending an eternity by yourself doesn't really sound like fun. Aren't you already tired of being alone?"

Homura merely gathers her book back into her hands and thumbs through to her last marked page. "I am not spending it by myself," as Sayaka opens her mouth to refute that claim, Homura continues, "I remain here because I am waiting."

"...Waiting? For what?"

"For Madoka to return from wherever she has gone to."

Sayaka freezes and then slowly lowers her fork back onto the plate. "...How is she, anyways?"

"Hm?" Homura keeps her attention on the book but glances to Sayaka briefly.

"I mean... She's... It's been..." Sayaka's shoulders droop and she places her hands onto the table. "...I can't believe I forgot her."

Lavender eyes flicker to her direction. "...It was her wish."

"She was.. IS my best friend. To forget she ever existed..." Hands tighten into fists.

"Mm... Once again, it was her wish. Her existence had to be erased as she became the embodiment of hope. Not even her family remembers her."

Takkun was slowly growing up and losing his memories as well.

Sayaka slams her fist into the table and if it wasn't magical it would've shattered under her strength.

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

"No."

Homura's bluntness has the anger in Sayaka deflating quickly and she sighs. "You... You're still the same. Which means that Madoka is probably the same—even under all that."

Homura nods. "She is the same yet at the same time, not. It happens to anyone who experiences the effects of eternity."

Sayaka finishes her cake quietly and Homura returns to her book.

"Hey, you never did answer."

"Hm."

"Who baked this cake?"

"...You never asked that."

"Well, I'm asking now. She could probably give Mami-san a run for her money. If... no, I guess, when Mami-san gets here, it'd be interesting to pit the two of them together."

Homura flips the page slowly. "...I have no interest in participating in a battle against Tomoe Mami."

"Eh?" Sayaka takes a sip of her tea as Homura's words fly over her head before her eyes widen and she spits out a mouthful of liquid onto the table. "Since when could you bake!? I remember you burning water!"

Homura calmly places her book down and starts wiping the mess with napkins pulled from nowhere. "Time is limitless here, Miki Sayaka. Mastering anything is easy when there is no beginning and no end."

"Huh..." Sayaka appears thoughtful and watches as the table sparkles clean once more.

"Homura-chan~ I'm back~" a familiar voice calls out and as Madoka steps through the doorway, her eyes are immediately drawn to Sayaka and she offers her childhood friend a smile. "Sayaka-chan! So you managed to find her."

"H-Hey, Madoka," Sayaka waves to her awkwardly, still not used to the taller and more adult-like Madoka that stares back at her. She had noticed earlier that she's now as tall as Sayaka, though still not as filled out.

"Did Homura-chan offer you cake?" Madoka asks as she takes a seat at the table. "She makes the best, don't you think? Maybe better than Mami-san, though I guess you would know if that was actually true or not?"

"Welcome back, Madoka. I'll get you your tea and cake."

"Thank you, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her with an affectionate smile before turning back to face Sayaka. "Have you had a chance to look around, Sayaka-chan? I hope you like how I decorated your room... I wasn't sure if you'd prefer it to look like the one you had at home or to change it up a bit. Just tell me if there's anything you need and I'll fix it."

"Ah," Sayaka scratches her head nervously. "It's alright. I mean—I like it! A lot. Y-Yeah..."

Madoka stares at her curiously though her attention is temporarily diverted as Homura places a cup and a slice of carrot cake in front of her.

"Thank you, Homura-chan," Madoka murmurs before she turns back to Sayaka. "Sayaka-chan?"

"Eh? Ah?" Sayaka looks like a deer caught in headlights and Madoka frowns.

"...I'm still the same, Sayaka-chan. You don't have to be so nervous around me."

Homura nods wisely, once again seated as she takes a sip of her own cup of tea. "Yes, the same Madoka is still there, the one that sometimes trips over her too long gown or the one—"

"Ahh!" Madoka quickly gets up from her seat and points at Homura. "Homura-chan is being mean! You promised you'd never mention that to Sayaka-chan and the others!"

Homura places her cup down onto the table. "Mm... I never remember promising such a thing Madoka. I only agreed that I would try not to mention it."

Madoka shakes her head vehemently. "Nope! You definitely promised! I remember!"

This time Homura frowns at her. "...I did no such thing. There you go again, misusing your powers—"

"Hmph," Madoka turns away from her to start on her cake. "I don't need to use my powers to remember that, Homura-chan."

"Madoka—"

Their argument is interrupted as Sayaka finds herself laughing at their exchange.

"Y-You definitely are the same Madoka," Sayaka grins as she wipes the tears from her eyes. "And Homura... you've changed. You've gotten softer."

Homura looks away as Madoka throws Sayaka a smile, glad to see that Sayaka is finally relaxing in front of her.

"Welcome home, Sayaka-chan," she tells her warmly.

"I'm home, Madoka!"

\\

"Huh... nice place you got here."

From her position on the floor, Homura first notices a set of familiar red boots before her eyes continue past the red magical uniform and finally landing to the owner's face.

"...Sakura Kyouko." The surprise is evident in her voice and Homura sits up, placing her book next to her as she regards the girl carefully. "I would've thought you to be the last of the group to arrive..."

Kyouko easily clears the distance between them and with a grin, she grabs Homura in a headlock and immediately musses up her hair.

"W-What are—S-Sakura Kyouko!"

Homura suddenly finds herself able to breathe again as Kyouko lets go and drops into the seat next to her. Lavender eyes watch her warily as she fixes her glasses back into place before working on her hair.

Kyouko grins. "You know, I always thought you'd be the last to go."

Homura blinks, hands lowering to rest in her lap.

"You always had that mysterious air about you, you know? You were weak at first, but there was something about you… Like you could take on the world and still fight no matter how hard things got…" Kyouko shakes her head. "Imagine our surprise when we learned you were the first to be taken away by the cycles… Idiot."

Not quite sure how to react, Homura remains in her seat as Kyouko places her arms onto the table and places her chin in her hands.

"…And now that I'm here, I finally remember everything…" Kyouko sighs. "I always did believe there was a Heaven…but," she glances around, "I assumed it'd be unobtainable after… everything."

Homura nods hesitantly.

"Anyways," that familiar grin locks back into place. "Someone told me there's delicious cake waiting for me if I find you, and since this is Heaven it better be the best I have ever tasted!"

"… You are the same as ever, Sakura Kyouko…"

"Nope!" Kyouko shakes her head at her. "No full names here in Heaven, Homura. Kyouko is fine."

"…" Homura ignores her request and stands to retrieve the tea and cake.

"Hurry up, Homura!" Kyouko calls out as she watches her walk to the kitchen. "I'm starving here! I just might turn into skin and bones waiting for you."

Homura sighs to herself but she does move a little bit faster.

Soon, a steaming cup of tea is placed in front of Kyouko who promptly ignores it as she dives into the slice of creme brulee cheesecake. She devours it within a few minutes and immediately shoves the empty plate at Homura.

"More."

She polishes off half the cake by herself before she finally stops and pats her stomach in satisfaction.

"I take it it was to your liking?" Homura asks as she glances up from her novel.

"Yeah, pretty good. Guess I won't be missing Mami's cakes for a while if this is what you have to offer here," Kyouko tells her with a grin. "Did you make that yourself?"

"Mmhmm," Homura nods.

Kyouko smirks and leans forward. "You know, I had this really good apple cake once... Mami could never get close to what I remember even though her cakes were still really good. You think you could give it a shot?"

Homura stares at her briefly. "...If you remember how it looks and can describe the taste, I can try."

Kyouko blinks in surprise. "Seriously?" She laughs to herself. "You've... you've changed, eh, Homura? I think this place has been good on you."

Homura turns back to her book.

"Hey."

"...yes?"

"...Sorry, for everything."

Her apology catches Homura off guard and she lowers her book. "...What are you apologizing for?"

Kyouko leans back against her arms and stares up at the night sky that serves as the ceiling. "You know, you're supposed to repent for all your sins and stuff before they let you into heaven. But... I didn't even remember what I did... until I came here." Kyouko shakes her head. "You've... faced a lot of challenges, you know? And I never did once make it easy on you. So I'm sorry for that."

"Hm." Homura turns back to her book. Her fingers brush against the red ribbon and she pauses. "...There's no need for you to apologize, I myself have—"

Kyouko lowers herself onto the floor and sighs loudly. "Whatever, things like that don't really matter now, do they? You forgive me, I forgive you. It's all the same. We're already in Heaven, right?"

Homura nods even though she knows Kyouko is no longer looking at her.

"Yeah..." she agrees softly. "Heaven..."

/

"...Homura-chan?"

She lowers her book immediately looking up. "Welcome back, Madoka."

"...I'm back," Madoka tells her and Homura stares at her curiously, watching as Madoka makes her way into the room, arms behind her as she hides something behind her back.

Homura slips her bookmark into the pages, shutting the book and placing it aside, completely diverting her full attention to Madoka who takes a seat with her arms still hidden.

She waits patiently for her explanation and knows it has something to do with the sadness that Madoka is also trying her best to hide.

"...I saw Mami-san earlier."

That meant that the blonde will be visiting here soon... but that also meant...

"...Takkun's gotten so big now."

...That Madoka visited her family.

"...How are they doing?"

Madoka gives her a watery smile. "Very good. Mama and Papa look the same as always and they're still getting along great."

Homura nods and places her hands in her lap. "Madoka—"

"And then," Madoka interrupts her as she finally reveals what she has hidden. A bottle of alcohol is placed atop the table and Homura stares at it blankly. "Mm. I made a promise with Mama that I would drink with her when I turned 20." Two empty glasses are suddenly besides the now opened bottle and Madoka gives her a smile. "Drink with me, Homura-chan?"

Though her appearance has never changed ever since making her wish, Homura knows she has lived a long time and has since passed the age limit. She nods lightly. She has never had alcohol before and watches with interest as Madoka pours the amber liquid into the cups, filling them halfway before adding a few ice cubes.

"Mama always drinks this at home," Madoka tells her as she pushes a cup towards Homura.

She can smell the strong waft of alcohol but she obediently gathers the cool glass in her hand and holds it up.

"Cheers," Madoka smiles at her and they clink their glasses together.

Tentative sips and Homura hides her disgust a lot better than Madoka.

"Nn..." Madoka shudders at the taste. "How is it, Homura-chan?"

"...Bitter."

Madoka nods and lowers the glass onto the table. "...I wonder why Mama likes drinking this so much...? She said this is how adults cope because the older you get, the harder it is to bounce back from things..."

She knows why, but she still doesn't quite *know*.

"Mm..." Homura takes another sip, this time keeping the liquid in her mouth as she swishes it around, trying to acclimate to the taste. She now knows to expect the burn of the alcohol as it slides down her throat and blinks when she tastes a hint of plum in the aftertaste.

"Do you like it, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks her curiously.

"...It's interesting," Homura replies and watches as Madoka peers at the cup. Just as she's about to take another gulp, Homura places a gentle hand on hers.

"Take a small sip and keep it in your mouth for a little while before swallowing slowly."

"Mmm..." Madoka follows as directed and though she makes another face when the liquid goes down, she's surprised when her tongue hits that taste of plum. "Huh..."

Homura stares down at her cup, expression thoughtful. "...I think, adults must like alcohol so much because it reminds them of the bitterness they

experience in their daily lives... Like alcohol, life is very bitter and day by day, their complaints and shortcomings must be swallowed. But, maybe if they stop and drink slower, they're able to appreciate things they may not see hidden in the background..."

She looks up and Madoka is giving her a fond smile. She automatically blushes and lowers her eyes.

"...That sounds like a good reason, Homura-chan."

Still not fully recovered, Homura nods and takes another sip. The alcohol makes her stomach warm and she glances over to see that Madoka has already stopped drinking.

Madoka catches her gaze and gives her a sheepish smile. "I think it'll take a while to get used to... you can keep drinking if you want to, Homura-chan."

Homura shakes her head and places the glass down. "Madoka."

"Hmm?"

"...Are you happy?"

Golden eyes turn to her and she can only blink as she sees the kindness in them.

"...If I told you I wasn't, what would you do, Homura-chan?"

Homura stares at her, face serious. "I'd do anything to make you happy, Madoka."

"Mm..." Madoka closes her eyes, smile still on her lips. "But what can you do, Homura-chan? You still have your magic but you can no longer go back in time." Eyes open and she finds Homura watching her closely. "The only one who really has power here is me, Homura-chan... You'd have to go against me to do anything."

She can see the internal debate in Homura's eyes and the way her body tenses as she tries to strengthen her resolve.

Madoka isn't afraid, however and she merely moves over from her seat until she's sitting right in front of Homura.

"Homura-chan...?"

"...?"

"...You'd do anything to make me happy...?"

A nod.

"Really...?"

"Of course."

"Mm..." Madoka glances down briefly and she leans in closer. "Anything...?" her voice is soft and if it wasn't for the quiet of the room, Homura would need to strain to hear her.

"Y-Yes...?"

"Then... kiss me, Homura-chan..."

Madoka watches as Homura immediately leans back, away from Madoka, face red and eyes wide in shock.

"W-What?" she stammers out and Madoka pouts at her.

"You said you'd do anything, Homura-chan."

Unable to form proper words, Homura merely chokes on air as she continues to stare at Madoka.

"Were you lying, Homura-chan?"

Homura gulps nervously. "I-I was... I mean... t-the... y-your..."

"Homura-chan?" She leans closer and as Homura moves to get away, her hand slips on her book, effectively sending her tumbling onto her back and Madoka is straddling her in a split second. "Homura-chan...?" she peers down at her and Homura turns her head, scrunching her eyes shut.

"Y-Yes, M-M-Madoka?"

"...When I said I saw everything about you... I saw everything," Madoka tells her and places a gentle hand to Homura's cheek, stroking it softly. "I've been waiting for you to make a move but you've been content with just being by my side even though I know you want more... Homura-chan...?"

"..."

"...I don't mind if it's Homura-chan..."

Lavender eyes open in surprise though she shudders when she notices how close Madoka really is.

"I'm not moving until you kiss me, Homura-chan."

"..."

"Mm... you're too shy, Homura-chan. I—" Madoka growls—actually growls—when she feels that tug and she throws Homura a glare when the girl sighs in relief. "...we will continue this when I come back."

And then she's gone.

Homura sits up and places a shaking hand over her face, pushing her glasses up slightly as she rubs her eyes. At most, she had been expecting to fight Madoka and was willing to face hell and fire to win.

Out of everything, she did not expect this and her face burns.

She's not sure how long she's sitting there, trying to calm her heart, but suddenly a familiar voice interrupts her thoughts and her head snaps up as Tomoe Mami walks into the room.

"...I'm sorry for startling you. I've been calling you for a while..." the blonde offers her a hesitant smile and approaches the table. "May I sit here?" she inquires politely.

Homura clears her throat, readjusting her glasses as she tries to compose herself and nods. "Y-Yes. I... would you like some tea? There's cake as well..."

Mami gives her a charming smile. "That sounds divine, thank you."

"I-I'll be right back," Homura tells her as she stands to retrieve the tea and cake.

Mami nods and spends the time waiting looking around the room curiously. The alcohol on the table has her wondering but she decides it's none of her business and disregards it.

Finally calm and more or less back to her normal self, Homura returns, setting the tea and cake in front of Mami before she removes the alcohol from the table and takes the bottle and cups into the kitchen. When she comes back, her hand is holding another cup of tea and she settles into her seat before sipping at her cup calmly.

"Mm... This cake is very good. I've never had it before, what is this called?"

"...Fachertorte. It's an European recipe."

"Ah," Mami takes another bite before reaching for her tea. "It pairs really well with this blend. I hate to admit it, but I think you're better at baking than I am..."

Homura shakes her head and gestures to the many bookshelves lining the walls. "They're just recipes I follow... nothing special."

Mami smiles at her as she takes another sip of her tea. "Now, no need to be shy, Akemi-san. I have experience with baking and I know a good baker when I see one."

Homura remains quiet and they enjoy the camaraderie as they drink their tea in silence.

Mami places her almost empty cup down and gives Homura another smile. "That was delicious, Akemi-san. Thank you."

"Would you like a refill?"

Mami shakes her head. "No thank you. I plan on heading over to the kitchens soon to help out with the meals."

Homura nods.

"Akemi-san?"

"Yes, Tomoe Mami?"

The familiar naming has Mami smiling lightly. "Perhaps we should discard formalities considering where we are, Homura. You can call me Mami."

"..." Homura glances at her, instantly reminded of Sayaka and Kyouko and their similar words.

"Now, what seems to be bothering you, Homura?"

She jumps slightly and then remembers her state of confusion that Mami had walked in on. She shakes her head, not at all wanting to admit her rather embarrassing situation.

"...I'm sure it has something to do with Madoka." Mami knows she hit the jackpot when Homura visibly flinches. She places a hand to her chin and peers at Homura curiously. "Did the two of you have a fight?"

Homura debates briefly. Did they? No... it wasn't really a fight... She shakes her head again.

"Ah, perhaps I worded it a bit wrong. Did you two have a disagreement?"

Homura pauses before nodding hesitantly.

"Hmm," Mami taps her chin thoughtfully. "Well, if it's the two of you, I think it'll all work out somehow."

"I'm back~" a familiar voice says as a figure rushes into the room.

Homura turns wide eyes towards the entrance.

"Mami-san!" Madoka gives her a smile. "It's good to see you."

Mami nods. "Yes, it's good to see you again, Madoka."

"W-Welcome back, Madoka..." Homura replies automatically and Madoka immediately zeroes in her, completely disregarding Mami.

"I'll be right with you, Mami-san," Madoka says distractedly as she approaches Homura who's now staring at her with fear in her eyes. "Homura-chan... don't make that face, please." She takes a seat in front of her and reaches out a steady hand to cup her face. Homura flinches and Madoka's lips tug into a frown. "... I know you want this, Homura-chan."

Homura closes her eyes and shakes her head. She tenses when she feels a weight against her forehead and her glasses are pulled away.

"...Homura-chan? Please open your eyes..."

She hesitantly cracks an eye open and finds herself staring straight into Madoka's golden ones.

"...You know? I want Homura-chan to be happy too..." Madoka whispers softly. "After all you've been through, all I want is for you to be finally happy. I want you to be selfish, to tell me what will make you happy. Can you do that, Homura-chan...?"

Homura blinks and is surprised to find her vision even more blurred from the tears in her eyes.

"I-I..."

"Hmm?" Madoka gives her an encouraging smile.

"... I want Madoka to be happy..." Homura tells her. She blinks and a tear runs down her cheek and Madoka reaches up to wipe them dry.

"...you know what will make me happy, Homura-chan..."

She swallows nervously and more tears appear. "...Your family..."

"...Is doing fine without me."

"Y-You should be there with them..."

"Mm, but who would be with you then, Homura-chan?" she asks as she gently brushes more tears away.

"I..."

"Hmm?"

She closes her eyes. "I...want to be with you forever, Madoka..."

"...we're already here, for eternity, Homura-chan..."

Homura nods.

"But are you happy with that?"

Her eyes open and she finds herself trapped in Madoka's piercing stare.

"...are you satisfied that we remain as friends...?"

Homura hesitates and shakes her head.

"N-No..." she mumbles.

"What do you want, Homura-chan?"

"I... I don't know..." the confusion is evident and Madoka knows this is because for all that Homura has experienced, she's still the same naive and innocent girl on the inside.

"We can just take this one step at a time, Homura-chan."

"O-Okay..."

A pause.

"...Can I kiss you, Homura-chan?"

"..."

"A 'welcome back kiss?'"

"..."

"Homura-chan?"

"...O-okay..."

Madoka smiles to herself. "Okay, I'm going to kiss you now, Homura-chan. Okay?"

"...O-Okay..."

Madoka leans in closer and Homura shuts her eyes as she feels something soft brush against her lips. It only lasts for a brief moment before the contact is gone.

"See, that wasn't too bad," Madoka tells her as she slowly opens her eyes. "Mm... later on we'll move on to more adult kisses," she grins and Homura blushes. "When you're ready, of course."

Homura stares down into her lap. "Madoka—"

There it is again and Madoka sighs softly but then brightens. "Do I get a 'have a safe trip' kiss?"

"E-Eh?" Homura blinks in surprise before Madoka gives her another chaste kiss on the lips. Her glasses are then slipped back into place.

"Sorry, Homura-chan, we'll practice more later. I'm looking forward to the 'welcome back' kiss though," she tells her with a wink before she pulls away and disappears.

Homura zones out as she recalls Madoka's soft lips and her eyes widen as she glances around.

The room is completely empty and there's no trace of Mami anywhere. She must have left earlier, hopefully before anything had started.

Homura presses her hands against her cheeks, trying to will the embarrassment away.

/

"Hey, Homura?" Pause. "Eh? She's not here?"

Homura peeks out from further inside the kitchen and sees Sayaka looking around in confusion.

"...Yes?" her quiet voice still manages to carry across the wide room and Sayaka looks up.

"Hey, there you are. I don't think I've ever seen you anywhere else but in front of that table," Sayaka states as she strides on over. "What are you making this time?"

"...Pudding," she answers as she gestures to the multiple amounts of cups lining the counters.

"Wow..." Sayaka blinks at just how many there are. "Made enough for everyone, eh?"

Homura nods and continues to fill the cups with the pudding mixture. "Did you need something?"

"Eh," Sayaka shrugs as she looks around the kitchen. It's the first time she's actually stepped inside and it's a lot bigger than she thought it would be. "Nothing really, just some of the girls wanted to go to the beach... thought maybe you'd like to come."

"...I see." Homura acknowledges but continues her arduous task of pouring.

"Guess you're a bit busy?" Sayaka asks after a moment.

"Just a bit."

Sayaka sighs. "Alright, I'll tell the others. Mm, well, at least the pudding will make them feel better that they were once again rejected by the Goddess's wife."

There's a pause as Homura barely manages to keep the hold on the pot before a frown finds itself onto her lips and she turns slowly to Sayaka. "...What did you call me?"

Sayaka smirks and places her hands behind her head. "That's what everyone calls you. Have been calling you—even before I came here. 'The Goddess and her loyal subject.' 'The Goddess and her wife.' 'The Goddess and her mysterious lover.' The list is endless."

There's a clank as Homura sets the pot onto the stove, careful not to spill the contents and she places a hand to her forehead. "...What..."

"See what happens when you don't go out?" Sayaka grins as she starts exiting the kitchen. "There's sooo many rumors floating around—don't tell me you didn't expect this? A place with just girls... it's like the perfect place for gossip and rumors to begin."

Homura shakes her head.

"Anyways, I'll tell them the ever diligent wife is too busy preparing dessert for tonight~ So they'll forgive you. See you!"

"W-Wait..."

Sayaka is already gone though, and Homura lowers her head in exasperation.

\\

"Yo~ Homura? Homura?"

Kyouko enters the room, blinking in surprise when she finds it empty. She scratches her head in confusion and if it wasn't for the slip of paper in her hands, she would just come back later.

She heads towards the kitchen but finds that empty as well.

"Really? I didn't even think she ever moved from that spot," Kyouko mutters to herself before she exits the kitchen. "Hm... now that I think about it, I've never seen the rest of this room. They gotta sleep somewhere, right?"

A quick check and her eyes immediately spot a door in the far left wall, hidden from view from the middle of the room but visible from the kitchen.

"Ah ha," Kyouko snaps her fingers and grins to herself. "She's gotta be in there."

As she approaches the door, she frowns and hesitantly places a hand on the handle. "I mean... it's not like she's busy, right? Or... hmmmm... well. I'm pretty sure Madoka isn't here... so they can't be doing anything..."

She shakes her head. "Whatever."

Without further preamble, she twists the doorknob, muttering in her head that if Homura really wanted privacy she would've locked it, and then she's pushing open the door. She doesn't know what she had been expecting to find, but she blinks as she stares into a plain hallway that has four doors, two on each side.

"Hmm... Okay. So now I gotta find which one she's behind. Geez, why couldn't you just be baking or something? But then again, that's kind of why I'm here... Ah... Sayaka's right, I talk to myself too much."

The first door she opens is their bedroom—shared, but she's not surprised. There's two beds, one with pink sheets that look untouched and another bed with purple sheets and various plushies scattered around. She shrugs and closes the room, not at all interested in the fairly muted decor and tries the next door that sits directly across.

It's another plain room, filled with various sets of things and boxes and Kyouko closes that door after a quick glance.

The next room has her blinking in surprise—it's lined with an assortment of weapons—submachine guns, pistols, and she is pretty sure she recognizes a rocket launcher in there hidden amongst the grenades and bombs. There's also a note on the front, written in pink handwriting that reads 'Look but do not touch' and Kyouko is fairly certain these are Homura's collection of weapons she had once used to fight witches.

"..." She shakes her head and gently closes that door, afraid she might set off traps or something and turns towards the last door in the hallway.

"Alright... if you're not here, Homura, I have no idea where you're at," she mutters and walks to the door. She nods to herself before she twists the handle and pushes it open.

She glances inside, looks back to the hallway to make sure that yes, she's in the correct place and then steps further inside.

Or, more like outside.

As her boots take her down the cobble stoned path, her head turns to look around at the random fauna that lines the large garden. There are Cherry Blossom trees that are in full bloom, orchids and lilies and roses scattered all around. There's also a small lake with a red coloured arch bridge over it and she can hear a hollow 'tock' sound every so often. As she approaches

the lake, she realizes the sound is coming from a piece of bamboo that fills with water before emptying and see-sawing down to hit a large rock nearby.

"Huh... this place... is so..." she pauses as she tries to think of a word. "...old-fashioned?" She nods. "Yeah... weird though, thought Homura loved that giant clock thing in her living room."

As she crosses the bridge and continues further inside, her ears pick up a sound that reminds her of twinkling crystals or glass and she follows it, knowing the girl she is looking for will be at the source.

Further in and she finally recognizes the sounds she hadn't been able to place; they remind her of the hymns they had sung in their church and soon enough, she finds herself in a large clearing with Homura right in the middle, sitting in front of a pure white grand piano.

Whatever song Homura had been practicing echoes away as lavender eyes stare at her.

Kyouko pauses, wondering if Homura will be angry at her for intruding on a very private place—but she's surprised when Homura merely shifts a few papers around and then turns her attention to Kyouko.

"...Sakura Kyouko."

"Yo, Homura," Kyouko tells her as she continues her steps until she's right in front of the piano. "I didn't know you played?"

Homura gives her that shrug again—that one that she always gives whenever someone mentions something about her and Kyouko shakes her head.

"...Did you need something?" Though Homura is looking at her, Kyouko can tell that she is not really paying attention; she tiptoes slightly to peer over the piano and can see that Homura still has her fingers poised atop the keys.

She no doubt wanted to get back to her practice and Kyouko nods before digging through her pockets and holding a piece of paper to Homura.

"What is this?" Homura asks her even as she accepts it. Her eyes quickly skim the words and she looks at Kyouko for further clarification.

"Well," Kyouko tells her as she points. "They're orders."

"..."

"This is probably why you haven't been baking much, eh?" Kyouko asks as she runs a hand across the smooth surface of the piano. "Anyways, some of the girls, especially the younger ones, have been really sad that the Goddess's wife is no longer making cakes..."

"..." Homura stares at the paper once more and then back to Kyouko. "Tomoe Mami can fulfill these requests, if I'm not mistaken..."

Kyouko grins at her. "It's like, with that apple cake I told you about; Mami's baking is good, yeah, but it's not the same. A lot of them are really used to your cakes..."

"...I can give Tomoe Mami the recipes."

Kyouko waggles a finger at her. "Still not the same. They want to taste the ones you bake. Face it, Homura, you got some fans here."

Homura places the paper down onto the piano and her brow furrows at the list. "...This is more than needed for everyone here."

"I'm surprised you even know how many people are here—I don't think I've seen you out there once."

Her words are accusing but Homura doesn't rise to the bait.

"I generally know how many there are... or Madoka tells me."

"Huhh... anyways, well, the reason why there are so many cakes is—everyone wants to have a party soon."

"...a party," Homura repeats, almost for confirmation.

"Yeah. A party—in heaven. You know, the younger ones... even though this place has like everything, it doesn't have everything, you know? And some of them have a harder time adjusting... We got to talking and found out that some of them have never had a birthday party, either. Ever."

It reminds them why some became magical girls and Homura sighs softly.

"I see... and when is this celebration?"

Kyouko grins, she knows that under Homura's hard exterior is soft jelly. "I'm not sure. Maybe in a few days. Will that be enough time for you to prepare things?"

"...I can make them whenever. I just need a set time."

"Hmm," Kyouko looks at her curiously, wondering how much access Homura still had to her time powers considering everyone kept most of their magic when they came here. It would explain a lot of things. "The sooner, the better."

Homura nods. "Alright... I can finish everything by tomorrow. Is that all?"

Kyouko thinks. "Ah. Right, and... well, we were discussing birthday presents and stuff..."

"I see..."

"And... well..." she trails off, knowing that this is the hardest part of her assigned task.

"...What is it?"

"...they kind of want you to attend. You and Madoka."

Homura blinks. "...why?"

Kyouko tilts her head back and isn't surprised by the clear skies that hang overhead. "Well... you know how I said you have fans? I really wasn't kidding... You know how Madoka is kinda like, the Ultimate Goddess here? Because of your relationship with her, you are also kinda like, the Ultimate Goddess's...ultimate person... thing."

"..."

"And thennn..." Kyouko continues with a shrug. "To have the two most important people here to attend their celebration would be the 'Ultimate gift,' or something. I'm not sure but they really want you two to attend. I think they just want to confirm that you exist."

Homura lightly presses down on a key and she frowns. "Madoka... will go. She loves parties... though she doesn't know if she'll be called away in the middle..."

"Yeah," Kyouko nods. "And you?"

Homura closes her eyes, fingers splaying over the white keys and her hands expertly run through the scales even though she doesn't press hard enough to make a sound.

"I make no guarantees," she eventually tells her as her eyes open.

"Hmm… well, on the day of, I'll be sure to come here to pick you up," Kyouko tells her with a grin.

Homura glances at her briefly, knowing that she isn't lying.

"Hm."

Kyouko yawns suddenly. "Man, this place is really relaxing. Mind if I take a nap here for a bit? For the travel back?"

Homura hesitates.

"You can play, the sound won't bother me."

"…Alright."

Kyouko throws her another grin. "Cool, thanks, Homura."

Homura ignores her, slipping the small paper from Kyouko safely into her dress pocket before staring at the sheet music resting atop the music rack.

She closes her eyes briefly, letting the tranquil sounds of the garden wash over her before opening her eyes and positioning her hands to the correct keys.

Kyouko smiles to herself from under one of the nearby trees, easily losing herself to the haunting music that surrounds them as Homura expertly plays.

/

"Thank you very much, Homura," Mami tells her with a smile. "I know I made copies before but they somehow keep getting lost in the kitchens."

Homura stares at her, finding half truths in her words but the fact that Mami still remains in front of her tells her she is also here for another reason.

"Did you need anything else, Tomoe Mami? I need to get back to my preparations, as do you…" her voice trails off and Mami continues to smile at her.

Mami tucks a stray strand of hair behind her ear, the only indication of her nervousness.

"Well, I was just wondering how you're doing. The few times I have dropped by, unfortunately you weren't in the main room."

And they both know she's polite enough not to wander further in, unlike some people.

"Hm, but," Mami gives her a wider smile. "I can see that my worries were for nothing. You seem happier, Homura. It looks good on you."

Homura blinks as she mulls over Mami's words. Is she happier?

She thinks to Madoka and her usual blank face softens and she smiles lightly to herself.

"...I guess I am."

"Good," Mami tells her. "You know, I always worried about Madoka and her wish; it was, and still is such a heavy burden... And even though, we're here, and Madoka is a Goddess now... I can't still help but see the same naive girl I took under my wing all those lifetimes ago. But..." she grins this time and winks at Homura. "When I found out that you went with her, I knew that she'd be okay. It's why I was able to hold out so long even after the rest of you left."

Homura's brow furrows lightly. "...What do you mean?"

Mami remains smiling that mysterious smile. "I'm glad that there's someone here that Madoka can be selfish to. We all know that she loves everyone and everything equally, but you... you are special to her, Homura. And I know she is the same to you." Mami bows lightly and turns around with another wink. "I'll leave you be for now. I need to make sure that Kyouko hasn't decided to eat all the food in my absence. I hope to see you at the celebration!"

Homura watches as she waves before hurriedly walking away, no doubt truly worried about Kyouko and the bottomless pit that she calls her stomach.

She shakes her head but there's a smile on her lips as she heads back inside.

\\

As she sifts the flour into another bowl, hands snake around her waist and she can feel the warmth as a familiar body slides up against her.

"Welcome back, Madoka," Homura tells her as she glances behind her briefly before continuing with her task.

"I'm back, Homura-chan," Madoka murmurs softly into her ear. "Mm... Homura-chan smells like strawberries..."

"Are you sure it's not the bowl of strawberries nearby?" Homura counters dryly. "Or the strawberry cakes surrounding us...?"

Madoka smiles to herself, face pressing against Homura's neck. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure. You know how they say each person has their own individual scent? Homura-chan's is strawberry... Mm..." Her eyes open and she grins. "I bet you taste like strawberries too, Homura-chan..."

Hands gripping the metal sifter pause and she turns to meet Madoka halfway as she leans in close, lips pressing against lips. Madoka takes the lead, deepening the kiss and when she finally pulls away, they're breathless and like always, Homura's glasses are crooked and her face is flushed.

"...Well?" Homura asks curiously as she readjusts her glasses and Madoka licks her lips.

"Mm... I was close... you still taste sweet, but... chocolatey."

Homura smiles and gestures towards one of the counters that is lined with cakes missing slices, no doubt her trial batches.

"Help yourself to a slice. I would get it for you but..."

Madoka places one last kiss on her neck before she steps away. "No need, Homura-chan, I know you're busy." She eagerly makes her way towards the cakes and her eyes rove around, trying to figure out which one looks the most appealing at the moment. "Which one should I eat, Homura-chan?"

"Hm?" Homura turns to her and stares at the cakes briefly. "The one in the 3rd row, the 7th from the right. You haven't had that one in a while."

Madoka counts the plates and points at a 3 layered cake that is coloured brown, pink and white and covered with chocolate icing. "This one?" she asks and waits for Homura's confirmation.

"Mmhmm," Homura agrees before her attention turns back to the flour.

Madoka carefully extracts a slice and places it on a nearby plate that Homura had most likely used earlier to taste test her food.

"What's this one called?" she asks curiously as she cuts a piece with her fork.

"Neapolitan."

Madoka thinks for a moment "No wonder it looks familiar. This is one of the first cakes you made." She takes a bite, letting the three flavours mesh on her tongue and her eyes light up at the rich yet not too overbearing taste. "MMm... Homura-chan, why did you stop making this? I remember really liking this."

"Yes and I did make it quite a bit," Homura comments without turning around. "People starting complaining though, if you remember. Since you only eat a slice, at most, with every batch, it was always up to the other girls to finish it... They wrote you a very polite yet firm letter, if I recall..."

"Ehehe," Madoka gives Homura a sheepish smile. "I do kind of remember that."

"I still have the letter, if you'd like to see," Homura offers and Madoka sticks out her tongue to her back.

"Mm... but it's been a while since I've really seen you baking this much," Madoka points out as she turns around to grab another slice of Neapolitan cake. "Kind of reminds me of when we first came here."

Homura is quiet, absorbed in her mixing and Madoka finishes her slice quickly. She places the plate back down onto the counter, knowing that Homura is still using it and watches as the other girl concentrates on her task, no doubt face serious even though she can't see her from here.

"You should've used the master kitchen instead. It's much bigger," Madoka tells her as she once again attaches herself to Homura's back. "I was there earlier. Everyone was having fun prepping for the celebration." She leans forward and rests her chin on Homura's shoulder, watching as deft hands mix and stir.

"Hm."

Madoka closes her eyes, relishing in their shared warmth. "Are you going to go? It's turning into something amazing. I hear they're going to set up a fireworks competition."

"...Please tell me Sakura Kyouko is not in charge."

Madoka grins, eyes still closed. "It was Sayaka-chan's idea actually. Maybe you should give them some pointers in mixing gunpowder? They might end up losing limbs. It won't hurt, but regrowing them is still rather unpleasant..." Her hands slip under Homura's apron, running up her sides and the other girl jumps slightly at the touch. "What's wrong, Homura-chan?" Madoka teases as her hands gently glide up and down; she knows that Homura is plenty ticklish and her thin dress hardly provides any protection. Her grin widens.

"M-Madoka," Homura shudders and tries to pull away. "I-I'm a bit busy—!" she yelps and almost ends up spilling her bowl of sifted flour if it weren't for her quick reflexes. She turns around, giving Madoka a rare frown.

"I'm sorry, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her and tries to placate her with a kiss on her neck. "Forgive me?"

Homura is unable to stay mad at Madoka and she merely sighs.

"The—" Madoka cuts herself off and this time Homura turns around fully and places a kiss to Madoka's lips.

"Have a safe trip, Madoka."

"Mm," Madoka leans in again for another kiss before she finally pulls away. "I'll be back, Homura-chan." Another smile, and then she's gone.

Homura immediately misses the warmth but she shakes her head to clear her thoughts. She still has at least two more sets to make and these cakes definitely did not bake themselves.

/

As quietly as possible, she tiptoes into the room, eyes watching the sleeping figure carefully. When she's close enough and about to grab her, an arm shoots out and grabs her own and she finds lavender eyes peering at her.

"Sakura Kyouko... what are you doing?" Homura lets go and sits up, immediately fixing her hair as per habit.

"Nothing," Kyouko tells her with a grin and watches Homura for a moment. She seems tired—which is strange in itself but she shrugs that away. "Today's the celebration."

"Hm." Homura still seems half asleep as she blinks owlishly at Kyouko. "And?"

"And I came to pick you up."

Homura stares at her blankly.

"You still asleep?" Kyouko asks as she snaps her fingers in front of Homura's face.

She flinches at the sound and leans back to put some distance in between them.

"It's okay, Kyouko," Madoka says as she appears through the doorway. "I'll bring Homura-chan along after I wake her up."

Kyouko starts at Madoka's sudden entrance. If she knew she would be back she wouldn't have bothered to make the long trip here.

"Sure. See you two there," she tells her as she stands, thoughts already thinking about the piles of food being prepared outside.

Madoka nods and waves to her as she exits the room. A smile flits onto her face and she turns back to Homura who is now rubbing her eyes tiredly. She had barely made the deadline trying to finish all those cakes.

"I'm back, Homura-chan," Madoka says as she immediately makes her way to the other girl.

"...Welcome back, Madoka," Homura mumbles and suddenly she finds Madoka leaning above her.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka's voice is soft as she presses herself closer, hands slowly trailing up her leg.

"H-Hm?" Homura's eyes widen and Madoka kisses the side of her mouth. Her glasses are pulled off and discarded onto the table.

"Activate your magic for a bit..." she tells her, voice low and breathless.

Wordlessly, Homura does as told.

When time clinks back into place, Madoka has a satisfied grin on her face.

"Are you awake now, Homura-chan?" she asks as she sits up and readjusts her dress.

Homura nods, brushing back her hair into place and straightens her own clothes. Madoka hands her her glasses and she slips them back on.

"Let's go, the others are waiting for us. I can't wait to try Mami's new dish... she's been on this Italian kick lately and I heard Kyouko teasing her earlier, calling it the new 'Tiro Finale.'" Madoka laughs lightly and even Homura smiles at the familiar phrase.

Madoka stands and offers a hand to Homura.

"Thank you, Madoka," Homura places her hand within Madoka's and she's easily pulled up to her feet.

"I'm really excited about the fireworks!" Madoka tells her as she rushes them out of the room.

Homura makes a noncommittally noise of agreement, content on letting Madoka lead her to their destinatio**n.**

/end *Sobssss*

AN: Rebellion-like mentions that are sort of like spoilers. Somewhat, but not really... I think... hm.

Lately, staying inside their room while waiting for Madoka has been leaving her restless. There's stirrings of previously dormant thoughts and memories in her mind, and those are pushed down even as her body itches to move around. To offset it, she has started taking long walks outside, in the private garden.

The garden, that she and Madoka claim as their own.

It had started out very simple: a small patch of land with a few flowers here and there.

Filled with common things that served as brief, colourful reminders.

Roses, and lilies, and orchids. Daisies, and dandelions, and recognizable things created on small whims.

Nostalgia for spring, had brought in a row of Cherry Blossom trees that are now in constant bloom.

And slowly, as this eternity became *home*, the small garden grew.

Sometimes, Madoka would return from her trips, a flower in her hand, or a smile on her lips.

And the garden she's currently walking in, is now a sprawling maze with interlocking pathways that blend and bleed into different seasons.

Today though.

Today is different.

She knows that Madoka is back; their connection extends as deep and as far as the worlds and timelines that Madoka can traverse.

A Goddess still has her duties however, and only when that is done, will Madoka finally come looking for her.

Today though, she is the one searching: Madoka is in the garden, she knows that.

But today, Madoka is calling for her.

Her footsteps are light as she crosses over the red bridge that arches across the lake. A glance to the side, and she can see that the surface of the water is covered with floating cherry blossoms, dyeing it with a soft pink. She watches as they slowly disappear, and like clockwork, more fall to take their place; it's an endless rain of cascading petals.

More walking, past the miniature zen garden, where one large rock is stacked in the middle, surrounded by fine, white sand with concise lines etched around it.

She'll try a new pattern soon.

But not today.

She continues onto the cobbled stone path lined with grey to rust coloured rocks, glazed to sparkle in the sunlight.

Spring is here, and if she follows this familiar walkway, the very end will lead to a large clearing. A place, where her own stage sits, where sometimes, the emotions she has buried deep within, are set free.

But today, is not one of those days.

She veers off, turning from the path made of stone to one made of compacted dirt. The surroundings here, slowly start heating up the further she ventures in.

Summer is here, where cosmos, sunflowers, and morning glories grow; the sight of them almost makes her nostalgic.

This is a section she rarely heads down, simply because she prefers the other seasons to this one.

But, she has a reason to head this way today, feeling that tug as Madoka calls out to her.

It takes a while, and she passes by a field filled with wild grown flowers that she can't place, until she finally finds her.

Sitting in front of a sizable cleared patch of dirt.

A pile of green, prickly, branch-like plants to one side.

Gardening tools, large dowels, and a few sheets of wood on the other.

Madoka turns around with a smile on her face, and a small trowel in her hands. "Homura-chan."

Homura nods in greeting, feet already moving to join her.

Once in front of her, she kneels and takes a seat.

"Welcome back, Madoka," she says, moving close.

Madoka's smile widens, as she leans into the kiss. "I'm back, Homura-chan."

Homura pulls away and glances around, eyes curious; it's the first time she has actually seen Madoka manually gardening.

"What are you doing?" she asks, watching as Madoka starts digging through the dirt once more.

"I'm building a home for them," she replies, hands still moving.

"Mm." Homura falls into silence, and there's only the sound of metal scratching into the ground.

After a moment, Madoka turns to her, smile still on her lips. "Are you just going to watch me the whole time?"

"Isn't that why you called me over?" Homura asks, tilting her head slightly.

Madoka grins, leaning close once more.

"Well, I don't really mind," she tells her when she eventually pulls away.

Homura nods, eyes flickering over to the strange, green plants. "Are they special?"

"You could say that."

Madoka's voice is tinged with something—and if Homura had been the same as when she had first arrived, it would've fueled her desire to do *something*.

Instead, she reaches for one of the tools and moves over, until she's sitting right next to Madoka.

"I'll help," she volunteers.

Another smile. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

/

It's slow progress, and they're not even a quarter done when Madoka is being called away.

Sensing her hesitance, Homura turns to her. "Did you want me to wait until you come back?"

"Mm." Madoka's no doubt calculating the time it'll take to get everything planted. "Hm, maybe..."

Homura knows what's she's thinking. "I'll wait. Have a safe trip, Madoka."

Another kiss. "Thank you, Homura-chan. I'll be back soon."

She nods, watching as Madoka vanishes.

When all that's left of her is her lingering presence and that timeless bond they share, Homura turns her attention to the strange plants.

Her hand reaches out, a finger extended as it gently pokes one of the many prickly spikes that surround it.

\

She's resting in a small gazebo further down when Madoka returns.

"Did you get sleepy?" Madoka teases, hands running through her hair as lavender opens to peer at her.

"It's nice and warm here," she replies, voice drowsy.

Madoka nods, leaning down for their usual greeting.

"Welcome back, Madoka."

"I'm back, Homura-chan."

Her eyes blink sleepily. "Did you want to join me?"

"Mm. It's tempting."

Homura holds out her arms.

"...How can I say no to that...?"

/

It takes them a while, until the dirt is prepped, to set up the supports, and to build the small structure for shade.

Homura stares, watching as Madoka gathers each plant in her bare hands. She carefully places them into the dirt, tying them to the upright wooden dowels for added support.

There's a whole row of them when she's done, and it's the strangest sight so far in this garden.

"What are these called, Madoka?" Homura asks.

Madoka smiles mysteriously. "It's a secret."

It's a surprising response, and Madoka grins, moving closer.

"Don't pout; you'll find out soon enough."

"...I'm not pouting," she insists.

A hand, covered in dirt, reaches to cup her face. "I promise, you'll find out soon."

There's something in Madoka's voice again, and this time, Homura nods. "I'll wait."

Another smile. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

\

Madoka is gone again, and after a brief check up on the strange plants in the garden, she's making her way towards the kitchens.

It's been a while since she has visited, and as long as she shows her face occasionally, the others leave her alone.

Relatively.

There's a chatter of voices the closer she gets, and the sight of her walking down the main hallway has some of the girls staring.

Lavender behind those red framed glasses of hers glances their way, and like always, they duck their heads, shy.

It's a strange reaction, and she has yet to get used to it, but the few that continue watching, their stares always makes her feel like she's on display.

It reminds her of those times when she walks with Madoka, except those are far worse; she has heard some of the rumors whispered through the grapevine.

She quickly increases her pace, heading through the doorway to the master kitchen once she's there.

Individual cooking stations are set up in rows here, reminiscent of cooking classes in school, or so she has heard from Madoka. Large shelves, stocked with anything and everything needed in a kitchen line one of the far walls.

Sinks are located in between each station, racks of spices and herbs on another wall, and a large walk-in refrigerator is located in the very back.

As always, the kitchen is bustling as many girls work together on prepping their meals. Those telltale sounds as knives hit the cutting board at a steady rhythm, dishware clattering, silverware clanging against ceramic.

In the midst of unfamiliar faces, she finally spots Mami in the crowd.

There's a large bowl in front of her, a knife in her hand as she works through various vegetables with ease.

Her usual smile is on her face, and her attention is half divided on the individual next to her. Homura doesn't remember her name, but her face is vaguely familiar.

She's heading towards Mami's station when the murmurs in the room slowly grow in volume: someone has noticed her entrance and that information is spreading like a wildfire down the rows.

Mami finally looks up when she hears that nickname whispered in the air. Her smile widens when she spots Homura walking towards her.

Her knife is lowered, and she quickly wipes her hands on a nearby dishcloth.

If Homura is disturbed by how the noises have suddenly cut off, she ignores it as she approaches Mami.

"Homura, what a pleasant surprise." Her smile is warm and friendly.

Homura nods. "Tomoe Mami." Her voice is quiet, but the cease in activity makes it seem louder than usual.

Mami sighs, even though the smile remains on her face. "When will you stop calling me that?"

Homura briefly glances away.

"Well, keep on working on that," Mami says, drawing back her attention. "Now, to what do we owe the presence of the Goddess's wife in our humble kitchens?"

The amused toned in Mami's voice has Homura sighing softly; she still can't really get used to that nickname.

"I'm just doing my rounds," she answers. "I was hoping Sakura Kyouko would be here as well."

"Ah," Mami smiles. "Kyouko is with the younger girls. I believe Sayaka may be helping her."

"I see."

Homura glances to the side, where she can see a few bolder girls starting to approach her.

Mami watches with amusement as one of them finally breaks away from the pack, stuttering and exchanging a few words with the infamous 'Goddess's wife.'

Soon, there are samples pressed into Homura's hands as they ask for her opinions on their dishes.

She has no idea why they seem so eager for her to try them, and why some of them squeal when she accepts their food.

But she humors them, stopping when her stomach is full.

"I apologize," she tells them, holding out a hand. "I'm afraid I'm at my limit."

There are a few gasps and more than a few grumbles.

Mami smiles, quickly coming to her rescue. "Now, now, girls. You know the Goddess's wife has a weak stomach." Homura sighs at this: another rumour. "You can wrap up your food, and she'll be able to eat them later."

They scramble to do so, already knowing that she will be leaving the kitchens soon.

Like always, there's boxes for her to take back.

Mami claps once. "Now, who would like to volunteer to help carry this over to the Goddess's room?"

Homura gives Mami a small nod, alerting her of her actions, before she slips away once the lottery starts to determine who will be the delivery girls.

She has no idea why she's so popular here, and it's not the first time she wonders how Madoka deals with it.

/

A relaxed pace through the hallways with her pointedly ignoring more whispers and stares. She's making her way towards the West Wing, where there are large rooms that are used both for classes and presentations.

These are the places that the younger girls usually occupied, sometimes learning, sometimes doing activities with the older girls.

Like the kitchens, there are the sounds of chattering voices the closer she gets, but it's louder, and the atmosphere is lot less subdued.

When she steps inside, there's a flurry of activity all around. Coloured paper, scissors, paint, even glitter is scattered on all the desks; they seem to be in the middle of making something.

She's searching for red or blue when there's a loud shout in front of her.

She blinks as a younger girl points.

"It's the Goddess's wife!"

Like in the kitchens, the noises suddenly stop, but this time, everyone quickly tries to hide what they're doing.

There's an arm thrown around her shoulder, and she jumps at the contact. She turns to face Kyouko, who gives her a grin; even after all this time, she still can't used to Kyouko's brashness.

"We're a bit busy today," Kyouko tells her, steering her towards the exit. "And, uhm. They're working on something. So... could you come back later?"

She should be offended, really, but she merely nods in acceptance; seems like everyone is holding a secret these days.

Kyouko pushes her out the entrance. She briefly glances back to see her waving.

She brightens, though it doesn't show on her face; she doesn't mind not having to spend time here.

\

She's in the gardens, staring at the strange plants when Madoka returns.

Arms slip around her waist as Madoka holds her close. "There's a bunch of food in our room. Did you visit the kitchens again?"

Homura nods, turning around to greet her. "Yes. Welcome back, Madoka."

Madoka presses a kiss to her lips. "I'm back, Homura-chan. There's no way we'll be able to eat all of that... You should be firmer with the girls."

Homura sighs, leaning against her. "I still don't understand why they want me to eat it... wouldn't it be better to offer the food to Sakura Kyouko...?"

Madoka grins. "Kyouko eats everything. She's... well, she's the equivalent of a garbage disposal; it means nothing since she'll eat food whether it's good or bad. Whereas you, my dear Homura-chan, rarely eat anything that's cooked by one of the other girls... Not to mention the fact that you're my wife. Imagine the bragging rights for that!"

Homura ignores the teasing lilt; Madoka really enjoys that nickname for her.

"...The younger ones were making something," Homura tells her, closing her eyes as she rests her head against Madoka's shoulder.

"Really? What were they making?"

"No idea," Homura mumbles. "They kicked me out before I could really look."

Madoka laughs. "They kicked you out?"

"Someone pointed to me, and everything stopped."

Another laugh. "That makes me curious. Makes me want to pay a visit."

"Mm."

"But, I already promised them I wouldn't."

Homura opens her eyes, pushing away slightly to look up at Madoka. "They told you to stay away?"

Madoka nods, a grin on her face. "Usually you voluntarily stay away, so I didn't think I needed to warn you."

"...Suspicious."

Madoka places a kiss to her forehead. "Don't pout."

"...I'm not pouting."

"Mmhmm." Madoka continues to hold her, eyes staring over her shoulder to the plants in front. "They seem to be doing very well," she says suddenly.

Not letting go, Homura turns slightly to glance over. The green, branch-like structures of the plant are starting to wrap around the dowels, following them as they grow upwards in a haphazard manner.

She's curious, and there's a large library filled with books she can browse through to figure out what they are.

But, she sticks to Madoka's wishes, and will wait for her.

"The continuous sunlight should make it bloom earlier," Madoka says softly. "It usually happens in the summer, so I hope I timed it correctly."

Homura stares; there are no flower buds as far as she can see.

Already sensing her confusion, Madoka smiles, pressing a kiss to her neck. "You'll see soon, Homura-chan."

She nods in acceptance.

"Alright, shall we return back to our room to eat?" Madoka asks. "Because, apparently, one of us has an appetite comparable to Kyouko's, and it's definitely not me."

Madoka moves her arms, until her hands are squeezing Homura's sides.

"Have you gained weight, Homura-chan?" she teases.

Homura twitches, moving quickly to grab her wrists.

Madoka dodges, and suddenly there's a devious grin on her face.

Sensing what's to come, Homura moves away. "Madoka... W-We should head back..."

"Mmhmm."

Homura slowly starts inching towards the pathway, eyes watching Madoka closely.

She sees her leg move, and Homura darts off with Madoka on her heels.

There's a brief moment, when she thinks she's in the clear, but Madoka suddenly sweeps past, tackling her in the process.

They tumble to the ground, kicking up dust and covering their dresses with dirt.

Madoka doesn't care though, and her hands reach down, fingers tickling Homura at her sides.

"M-Madoka!"

Madoka ignores her, grinning as they fill the garden with the sounds of their laughter.

It's the only time Madoka really hears Homura laughing so freely, and she's relentless with her attacks.

/

They're still lying in dirt, Madoka cuddling Homura close.

"I'm sorry, Homura-chan. I went a bit too far."

Homura sighs, wiping the tears from her face. "You... seem to resemble a demon more than an angel at times."

She coughs lightly, and Madoka's hands are immediately on her back, patting her in comfort.

Madoka pouts. "I'm sorry. Forgive me?"

Homura glances over, and there's no way she can stay mad at Madoka for too long.

She nods, Madoka brightening and leaning in for a kiss.

Hands slip around her waist, and she's pulled closer.

When they finally break free, Homura takes a moment to catch her breath.

"You're... still a demon though," she tells her.

Madoka pinches her side, eliciting a startled yelp.

"But... you're my demon...?"

Madoka grins, tugging her close.

\

Homura is in their room, lying by the table, and falling asleep when Madoka returns.

She glides in through the doorway with a smile on her lips. "I'm back, Homura-chan."

"...Welcome back, Madoka," Homura mumbles, not moving from her spot.

"Are you getting complacent, Homura-chan?" Madoka demands as she kneels in front of her.

Homura opens her eyes to see Madoka glaring—but the smile she's fighting down tells her otherwise.

"Maybe," she murmurs, eyes closing once more.

Madoka sighs, leaning down for a brief kiss, before she pulls away.

Homura hears the rustling of her dress, and she's almost asleep, when Madoka suddenly cuts into the silence.

"You ever think about having kids, Homura-chan?"

No reply.

"Homura-chan?"

A hand, shaking her awake.

"I know you heard me, Homura-chan."

One lone eye cracks open, and this time Madoka has a real frown on her face.

"Kids...?" Homura questions.

Madoka nods. "Kids. A little, mini Homura-chan running around..."

Her eyes close once more. "No, not really."

That same hand, a bit more forceful with her shaking this time. "Homura-chan."

She sighs, eyes opening as she reluctantly sits up. She grabs her glasses off the table, and slips them in place, before working to fix her hair as she thinks to Madoka's question.

"Kids...?" she asks once more.

Madoka nods. "Kids. Babies. Little, small people. You know, those things, when a man and a woman get together—"

Homura sighs, hands dropping into her lap. "I know what kids are, Madoka."

"You haven't answered my question."

"...What brought this on? Kids...?"

Madoka is looking to the side, an almost nostalgic expression on her face. "Nothing. I was just thinking... about things."

Homura stares. "I see... well..." She blinks. "Uhm. You're going to have to ask someone else to help you with that."

"Huh?" Madoka turns to her.

"Well... It's..." she gestures, cheeks slowly turning pink. "There's... We're both female, Madoka."

Madoka nods. "Yes. I am quite aware of that Homura-chan."

Homura raises an eyebrow, hand held out. "Uhm..."

Madoka grins. "Use your words, Homura-chan."

"T-There's... certain parts, kind of missing...?" she coughs out, averting her eyes.

Madoka is suddenly in front of her, leaning forward, and face very close. "...I'm a Goddess, Homura-chan," she says softly. "Something like that, can be easily taken care of..."

She grabs Homura's hand, who squeaks as Madoka starts pulling it downwards.

"M-Madoka!"

Madoka starts laughing with that devious grin on her face. "You should've seen your face, Homura-chan!"

Homura sighs, hands to her face as she tries to clear her blush. "You... You little demon..."

Madoka peppers her with kisses. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. You're so easy to tease, Homura-chan."

"Ugh..." she shakes her head.

"But... kids, Homura-chan. What do you think about them?"

Homura leans back. "Kids? I don't know. I didn't even like myself as a kid, I think."

Her admittance has Madoka reaching over to hug her close.

"They're... I might've thought they were cute, once. A long time ago. Maybe?"

Madoka presses a kiss to her cheek.

"Now... I'd imagine having kids would be the equivalent of raising a mini Sakura Kyouko combined with Miki Sayaka."

At Madoka's confused expression, Homura explains.

"Something annoying that eats a lot..."

Madoka grins. "You better not let them hear that."

Homura shrugs.

"Mm, but I'd imagine they'd be like a mini Homura-chan, too," Madoka adds in. "She'll be grumpy when things don't go her way."

Homura reaches for Madoka's hand. "She'd probably be as adorable as you," Madoka smiles, "...and be a little demon when you least expect it."

Madoka sticks out her tongue. "Kids..." she sighs out, that expression once more on her face. "A family..."

Homura watches her for a moment. "I'm, not sure what you're looking for Madoka, but, the younger girls here, aren't they more or less like your kids?"

Madoka blinks.

Homura nods. "They... they look up to you, and practically worship the ground you walk on. And you... treat them all very kindly; something I imagine what a mother would be like."

Madoka places a hand to Homura's cheek as she leans in close. "If I'm their mother, then you'd be their father," she tells her with a smile.

Homura tilts her head.

"The grumpy, strict, stoic father," Madoka clarifies.

"...If I recall correctly, your Papa was rather kind."

Madoka grins. "My family is a bit unconventional."

Homura nods. "Mine too."

Madoka sighs, and places a kiss on her lips. "Homura-chan..."

"It's fine. I don't really care. I don't even remember much anymore."

Madoka stares into her eyes, and something in her heart twists when she realizes that Homura's telling the truth.

She gently pushes Homura down.

"I love you," she tells her, gold staring down into lavender.

"Madoka...?"

"I love you," she repeats, almost fiercely.

Homura can only blankly stare. "Uhm. Me too... t-that...I—"

Lips press onto hers as hands slip around her waist.

"Mado—"

"Mm, you can stop using your words now, Homura-chan..."

/

Her thoughts are on tea and cupcakes as she steps through the doorway, door closing shut behind her.

Before she can head to the kitchen, a voice shouts out and she finally looks up to see Kyouko sitting by the table.

"There you are! Geez, it's seriously getting so much harder to find you! I went to your piano, but you weren't there either!" Kyouko grumbles, feet moving as she stands.

Homura turns away, continuing to her original destination. "Did you need something, Sakura Kyouko?"

Kyouko follows her into the kitchen. "Yeah, the kiddies want you to visit; they're upset you didn't come back!"

Homura pulls out a teacup and places it on the counter. "Would you like some tea?"

"Didn't you hear me?"

Her hands are shifting through the containers of tea leaves. "Cupcake?"

"...what kind?"

"Strawberry shortcake."

"...Sure."

\

Kyouko is eating her fifth one, when Sayaka storms in through the doorway.

She takes one look at Homura, who's calming sipping at her tea, and another look at Kyouko, who's stuffing her face, before she sighs.

"Why... are you two still here?" she demands loudly.

"Tea break," Homura replies, placing her cup down. She gestures to the plate of cupcakes. "Would you like one, Miki Sayaka?"

"No. Hurry up already! Some of the kids are starting to get upset!"

Homura stares at her. "I'm not sure what's happening."

Sayaka quickly strides over, clearing their distance as she raises her hand.

She smacks Kyouko on the back of her head. "You! Didn't you explain to her what's happening?"

Mid chew, Kyouko shakes her head. "Mno?"

Homura cuts into her cupcake with her fork. "She mentioned 'the kiddies wanted me to visit.'"

"...So, why are you still here?"

"Well," Homura brings the fork closer to her mouth, "the last time I visited, I was quickly kicked out; I didn't want to chance it again."

She takes a bite.

Sayaka sighs. "Yeah—that was... kind of a bad way to handle it. But, they want you to visit now. They need to ask you questions."

"Questions?"

Sayaka nods. "Yeah. About the Goddess."

Homura eyes her curiously. "...Why?"

Sayaka exchanges a glance with Kyouko, who shrugs. "Uh... well. You know how Madoka now kind of has this place mimicking the regular world, and how we kind of follow the calendar and stuff?"

Homura nods. "Yes. I helped her work on that."

"Right. Well... It's almost May," Sayaka tells her.

Her expectant look has Homura feeling like she should know the significance of that.

Instead, Homura ignores how her pulse jumps as she recalls something else, hand reaching for her tea to wash the feelings down.

"May...?" she asks, lowering her cup.

"Uh," Sayaka glances over to Kyouko, who shrugs again. "Yeah. May. You know... It's—"

"Homura-chan~"

Madoka enters the room, smiling wider when she sees Kyouko and Sayaka inside.

"Sayaka, Kyouko, what are you two doing here? Did you come to kidnap Homura-chan?" she asks, smile still on her lips.

"Uh..." Sayaka scratches the back of her head. "Actually, yes."

Madoka nods. "I have a few things I need to check on anyways. Homura-chan?"

She's finishing her cupcake and looks up. "Hm?"

"Where's my welcome back kiss?" Madoka pouts at her.

Homura glances over to Sayaka and Kyouko. "Uhm."

Sayaka sighs and quickly grabs Kyouko's arm. "Come on. Let's go outside and wait. And no, you can't have another cupcake! Do you know jealous those kids are going to be when they heard you ate something Homura made?" she hisses.

Kyouko still manages to grab one more, stuffing the pastry into her mouth as Sayaka pulls her outside.

"Why are you so shy, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, throwing her arms around her. "You have to have heard some of the rumours they say about us, haven't you?"

Madoka leans closer.

"And, you know some of those rumours are actually true..."

Homura nods, meeting her halfway for their kiss. "Yes. But..." she glances down, cheeks lightly pink. "It's..."

"Hmm?" Madoka grins.

She sighs. "...Nothing."

"You shouldn't be so shy... I bet some of them wouldn't mind watching..." Madoka tells her.

Homura blushes.

"Well, considering how cute you are, I'm not really surprised." Another kiss. "Alright, I'll let you go now. I want to check on the plants."

"...They're doing well. I believe I saw a few buds starting to develop."

Madoka smiles. "Really? Good! I thought I might've messed up something when I extracted the roots, but I guess it worked out." Another kiss. "I'll let you go."

Homura tilts her head. "You keep saying that, yet you're still holding onto me, Madoka."

"...I know." Madoka sighs. "Alright." She reluctantly pulls away. "You better not be cheating on me with someone else!"

"That would be impossible. Although..." Homura averts her eyes. "I haven't been entirely truthful to you, Madoka."

"...What?"

"Before I met you... there was someone else."

There's a pause, as Madoka shifts through various memories, but she has no idea what Homura is talking about.

"What?" she repeats, a frown forming on her face.

Did she miss something somewhere?

Homura smiles, a hand reaching for Madoka's. "She was this really, really adorable girl. Kind of clumsy, but she had this incredible heart of gold. Until she made a wish, and became a little demon."

Madoka pinches her side and she yelps. "I was really worried there for a second!"

Homura's lips twitch, and she leans in.

At the last second, Madoka turns her head, pouting. "You're a little devil yourself at times, Homura-chan."

"I don't mind being a devil for you, Madoka," Homura replies.

When Madoka turns back to look at her, Homura surprises her with a kiss.

"I'm sure Sakura Kyouko and Miki Sayaka are tired of waiting. Welcome back, Madoka. And, have a safe trip."

Another preemptive kiss.

Madoka nods, smiling. "I'm back, Homura-chan."

/

She's fixing her hair in their bedroom when Madoka returns.

"I haven't seen that hairstyle on you in a long time," Madoka tells her. "You should wear it again."

"No, thank you," Homura responds, fingers finally managing to untie the knot on the ribbon. "Some of the younger girls were messing around. It's the only reason why they're like this."

Madoka watches as she pulls the ribbon out, braids untangling as Homura runs her fingers through her hair.

"They make you look so cute though," Madoka says after a moment. "And you still wear your glasses!"

Homura stares at her reflection, at the familiar thick red frames sitting on her face.

Her expression gives nothing away, but Madoka walks over, slipping her arms around her waist as both their reflections now stare back in the mirror.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura lifts her hand, fingertips gently brushing the reflective surface. "You are different here, Madoka," she murmurs. "You're older. Taller. Yet I'm still like this. The glasses... I thought they would make me look older. But—"

Madoka hugs her tighter. "I like them." She presses a kiss to her neck. "I'm back, Homura-chan. You've been lazy with your welcome back kisses lately. Are you getting tired of me?"

"...You know that is impossible, Madoka."

"Then you're just being lazy?" she pouts.

"...I'm happy, Madoka," Homura tells her, blinking back sudden tears. "I'm really happy—"

Madoka turns her around, pressing their foreheads together. "What's wrong, Homura-chan?"

She shakes her head, drawing in an unsteady breath. "Sometimes, when I wake up, and you're not there, I'm not sure if you're real or not. Is this real, Madoka?"

Hands on her face. "Look at me, Homura-chan."

Her vision is blurry, and there are tears pooled in front of her eyes. She blinks, a tear trailing down and Madoka wipes it away with her thumb.

"I'm here, Homura-chan. You're here. All of us are here."

Madoka reaches up, pulling off her glasses. Lavender stares at her, and she can see the uncertainty in those eyes. She presses kisses onto her eyelids, onto her cheeks.

"I'm here, Homura-chan," Madoka repeats, voice firm.

Homura nods, eyes closing. "You're here, Madoka..." she whispers. "You're real..."

Madoka reaffirms this, with the only way she knows how: she leans forward, capturing Homura's lips with her own.

"I'm real, Homura-chan," she says in between kisses. "I'm real."

She pulls away suddenly, eyes glancing over to the side.

"We're real, Homura-chan," she says, hands tugging her along.

\

She's sitting in front of those strange plants, staring, when Madoka rushes in, steps hurried.

"Homura-chan!"

Homura turns. "Welcome b—"

Madoka is suddenly on top of her, pressing desperate kisses to her lips. "I'm sorry, Homura-chan. I'm so sorry."

"Mado—"

"I didn't even notice the date—"

"Ma—"

"I didn't even realize it would affect you so much—

"Mado—

"It's—"

"Madoka!

They both stare at one another.

Homura reaches up, looping her arms around Madoka's neck, and pulls her down for a kiss. "Welcome back, Madoka."

"...I'm back, Homura-chan," she murmurs.

"Now, what's this about the date...?" Homura asks.

Madoka sighs. "It's... almost May, Homura-chan."

Homura ignores how her pulse quickens, and she turns away. "W-What about May, Madoka?"

Madoka stares at her. "...Don't hide from me, Homura-chan."

She doesn't reply, instead, she closes her eyes. "It'll pass. T-Tomorrow..." She draws in a shaky breath. "T-Tomorrow will happen, right, Madoka...?"

Her voice cracks, and Madoka holds her close.

"Of course it will, Homura-chan. Tomorrow, and the day after. And every day after that."

Homura nods, ignoring the impulse to gather her magic her hands; that same impulse that has been making her restless lately.

"Tomorrow," she whispers once more.

"Tomorrow," Madoka repeats, arms tightening.

They continue lying there, until Madoka finally pushes herself off Homura to look at her.

"Homura-chan...?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"...Your memories. I can fix them. Change them."

Homura remains quiet, eyes open and staring off to the side.

"Homura-chan?"

She shakes her head, finally giving Madoka a smile. "No. It'll... it'll take a while for me to get used to this, but..."

"Are you sure? Maybe... we should get rid of the time—"

"Madoka." Homura reaches out, a hand placed onto Madoka's cheek. "I'll be fine. Maybe, this is what I need. Time... has already stopped for me, maybe it's about time it continues."

There's a smile at her small pun, but Madoka stares at her, noticing how Homura's hand is trembling against her face.

"But," Homura breathes out. "You'll... you'll be here, right, Madoka...?"

"Of course, Homura-chan."

Homura nods, closing her eyes. "Good. I'll be fine then," she whispers softly.

Wordlessly, Madoka lowers her head, resting it against Homura's chest. "You'll be fine, Homura-chan..."

/

The transition from April to May is as every bit as painful as she'd expect it to be; if she had remained back there, instead of following after Madoka, she would have eventually succumbed to insanity.

She has no doubts about that.

When Madoka is not here, she can no longer stay in their room; her tie to time makes her all too aware that it's May now, and as every day passes, her anxiety builds because her existence rests solely on that one repeated month.

Anything after, she doesn't know.

Her walks through the gardens are endless now; it's the only place not encumbered by the flow of sands as their own seasons take precedence over all else.

It doesn't mean that she doesn't feel the seconds tick by. The feeling is merely weaker here.

More than often, she's walking through Summer, her feet eventually leading her to those strange plants that are thriving under their watch.

There are numerous red coloured buds now, and Madoka's murmurs telling her how they will bloom soon has her at least waiting for something.

She's taking a nap in the gazebo once more, when she hears footsteps, and feels the vibrations as someone walks up the small steps leading into the structure.

Her eyes open, and the first thing entering her gaze are those familiar winged heels that are a permanent part of Madoka's outfit.

Her gaze slowly drifts upward, past the light pink stockings that disappear as pure white pools over it: Madoka's ridiculously long dress that is big enough to encompass the galaxy; or at least the stars contained within.

Lavender continues up, to the slim waist, but before her eyes can reach that exposed section of Madoka's skin, an amused voice drifts through her ears.

"Like what you see, Homura-chan?"

She blinks sleepily, moving her head, and suddenly Madoka is there, sitting in front of her, staring down.

"Am I dead, Madoka...?" Homura asks her.

A frown appears on Madoka's face. "Homura-chan?"

Homura closes her eyes. "It's the only reason someone as beautiful as you could be here, next to me."

Madoka's lip twitches in amusement. "Are you still sleeping?"

"Once," Homura continues, not answering her question, "I don't know why I remember, but I heard this joke once on television. 'Did it hurt?'"

Madoka smiles in confusion. "What?"

"'When you fell from heaven?'"

Madoka reaches over, laughing softly. "Homura-chan?"

Eyes still closed, Homura smiles. "The funny thing is... in religion, angels that fall from Heaven are demons."

Her eyes open and she can see that Madoka is trying to appear angry, but she's failing miserably.

"You," Madoka laughs. She sighs, smile still on her lips, leaning down as usual. "I'm back, Homura-chan."

Homura reaches up, arms placed around Madoka's neck to draw her close. "Welcome back, Madoka."

With a bit of coaxing, Madoka joins her on the gazebo floor, where they both stare at the wooden roof that provides shade against the harsh sunlight of Summer.

"The others are getting worried about you," Madoka tells her after a moment passes. "They can never find you."

Homura hums softly.

"There's... a celebration soon."

"...What's the occasion?"

Madoka holds her tighter. "For something that happens in May. They won't directly tell me what it is, but I'm pretty sure I know what it is."

"I see."

Madoka turns to her, lips pressing against her cheek. "Do you know what it is, Homura-chan?"

Lavender continues staring above. "...No."

May... has no meaning to her.

Neither do any of the other months.

Except for one.

"Mm." Madoka presses another kiss to the side of her head. "You'll... find out soon enough."

"...Just like the flowers?"

Madoka smiles, nodding. "Just like the flowers," she promises.

They lapse into silence, and Homura turns her head, resting hers against Madoka's. "Okay. I'll wait."

Hands tug her closer, Madoka holding her as she falls asleep.

\

Summer with its strange plants and various gazebos aren't her favourite places in the garden.

It's just places she tends to end her walks in.

Further, past Summer, is Autumn.

And sometimes, she's there, walking through the rows of maple and ginkgo trees; the multicoloured leaves drifting past her, like a red and yellow rain spilling across the sky.

She likes the soft crunch as dried leaves scatter under her light footsteps.

The leaves, like everything else here, are endless.

That repeated cycle, reminds her of herself: the brittle foliage cracking under the slightest pressure, only to disappear again to the tip tops once more.

It's how she feels like, these days: stable one moment, a fragile mess the next.

She's still waiting for those flowers to bloom though.

Something about them, how they fill Madoka's voice with *something*; she can only wait and see why.

Her hand reaches out, easily catching a red leaf in her palm.

The leaves falling are unlike the ones on the ground; her fingers close around it, but when they unfold, the leaf is still in one piece.

She turns her hand, watching as red slowly drifts down.

A moment later, it disappears, no doubt joining the others to flutter about once more.

/

She can't say she's deliberately avoiding them, but she's definitely not making it any easier for them to find her.

She knows Madoka is giving them hints: sometimes she notices footprints placed onto the soft ground, recognizing them to be Sayaka's or Kyouko's.

They haven't caught her yet, and she hopes to keep it that way.

At least, until she can finally face them again.

Just in case, she's in a different gazebo today.

Lying down, her long hair pooled around her, glasses discarded nearby.

Madoka is searching for her, and she can feel her disappointment when she's not in her usual spot.

"Are you hiding from me too, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks as soon as she appears.

Her arm is covering her eyes. "...No."

Madoka takes a seat besides her. "...I'm sorry, they just want to help. I'll tell them to stop searching for you."

She finally moves her arm, lavender staring into gold. "...Join me?"

Madoka smiles. "Sure."

She lies down with her, holding her close.

Madoka runs her hands through her hair. "Homura-chan..."

"Hm...?"

"They're... having a meeting, soon..."

"...About...?"

"Some of them heard about what's happening to you," Madoka tells her softly. "They're going to take a majority vote, to determine if they want to keep time in place."

Homura remains quiet. "...Why?" she eventually asks.

Madoka hugs her tighter. "Everyone's... starting to get worried."

"...Why?"

"Homura-chan." Madoka's voice is suddenly hard, and she knows she has upset her.

"...I'm sorry, Madoka."

It's only been a week into May, but Homura seems so much more worse.

"Why... are you doing this to yourself?" Madoka asks, voice quiet, tinged with sadness.

Something Homura hasn't heard in a while; how long though, she's not sure.

She doesn't reply.

"Homura-chan... please." Madoka is begging.

Homura turns to her, arms pulling her close. "...Welcome back, Madoka."

Madoka leans in, and Homura finally looks at her when she realizes that Madoka is crying.

"Madoka...? What's wrong?"

"How... how am I supposed to believe that my wish was right? When all I see is you falling apart in front of me?"

"Madoka...?"

Madoka reaches over, burying her face in Homura's neck. "You're supposed to be here for me, Homura-chan! You're supposed to be happy, that you're with me! Instead, you're here, always hiding in the gardens. And I can't stay with you—because I have my duties to fulfill! Do you know how hard it is for me? When I'm always so far away, and how it always feels like one day I'm going to return, and you'll be *gone*?" she whispers.

Homura's mask cracks slightly, and she tightens her hold. "I'm sorry, Madoka." She places a kiss on the side of Madoka's head. "I'm sorry. I'll try harder, I promise."

Madoka pulls away, and Homura can see the tears staining her cheeks.

The sight is so familiar—that she's suddenly reminded of 'Kaname Madoka.'

Something untwists in her heart; she realizes that just because it's May, it doesn't mean she has no purpose.

This Goddess in front of her... no matter her powers, no matter the time, is still the same girl buried beneath all the smoke and mirrors.

"I'm sorry," Homura apologizes once more, reaching out a hand to Madoka's cheek. She wipes the tears away, before she leans in close, placing a gentle kiss on her lips. "I'm sorry, Madoka. I'm not going anywhere."

Madoka sniffles, staring hard into lavender. "You promise?"

"Yes," Homura nods. "I promise."

Gold locks onto hers. "...Show me. Show me how much you mean it."

Homura stares at her for a brief moment, before she nods. "...Alright."

\

"The flowers are blooming soon, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, hands moving to trace lazy circles against her stomach.

Homura shifts, turning her head to face her. "...Before, or after the celebration?"

Madoka's hand pauses. "Before. Did you figure it out...?"

Homura shakes her head. "No." She reaches over, grasping Madoka's hand to pull it close. "Truthfully, I can't really remember anything before I met you. Most of the memories I have, they're all linked to you." She kisses her wrist. "But that's okay. I don't mind."

Madoka wraps her arms around her. "Homura-chan... I..."

They both feel it, that tug.

Homura smiles, placing a gentle kiss to Madoka's cheek. "Have a safe trip, Madoka. I'll be waiting for you to return."

A hesitant nod, followed by an even more desperate kiss. "I'll be back soon, Homura-chan."

She remains lying there as Madoka fades away.

"I love you, Madoka..."

/

She's in the kitchens, bowls lined up around her; numerous sets of eyes watching as she tries to ignore their gaze.

She's making cakes, but she has no idea what she's baking for.

Mami is next to her, helping with the preparations, and Kyouko has already been scolded for dipping into the mix; Sayaka had been forced to drag her outside to help with the decorations instead.

She's used to quiet when she's in their private kitchen, but the muted atmosphere surrounding her here makes her tense.

There's a sudden shatter to the silence: someone has dropped a dish nearby. The one she's holding slips from her hands as she jumps.

"You should be more careful, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, smile on her lips as she balances the bowl expertly in her palm.

Homura blinks in surprise. "Madoka. Welcome back."

Madoka nods as she places the bowl onto the counter. She then leans forward for their usual greeting.

Homura glances at her, before her eyes flicker around; she's pretty sure she heard more than a few gasps.

"Homura-chan...?"

She turns back, to see Madoka frowning at her, still leaning forward expectantly. "M-Madoka—"

"I'm waiting, Homura-chan."

"T-The—"

Madoka pouts. "Homura-chan."

Homura leans forward, placing a brief kiss on her lips, already moving away before Madoka can reciprocate.

Madoka, however, grabs her, bringing her back for a deeper, and definitely more passionate kiss.

Madoka is smiling when she finally lets go, leaving a dazed Homura to stare at her.

"A little service for everyone," Madoka tells her with a wink, hands moving to fix Homura's glasses back into place.

The loud whispers around them only makes Homura blush even harder.

She ends up finishing the rest of the cakes in their private kitchen.

\

It's rare for her to go outside, and she's only here, atop the large hill that overlooks their large structure, because gunpowder is not allowed inside.

An enforced rule, because someone had nearly destroyed an entire wing of the building with their carelessness.

If she had to guess, she has no doubts that Sayaka or Kyouko was a part of that.

Regardless, she's sitting on the grass, barrels of black gunpowder and other chemicals and minerals surrounding her. She's helping with the fireworks, making her own batches that will be used in the celebration for tomorrow.

She's not the only one here, but something about the smell, and the familiar materials, places her into a different time frame.

She's distracted and the movements are so ingrained that the shell she's working on ends up with too much gunpowder: she has pretty much made a giant bomb.

She stares at it blankly.

Eventually, she merely sets it aside and starts working on another one.

There are two piles next to her when she hears a familiar voice.

"Yo, Homura!"

She turns, and Kyouko and Sayaka are climbing the hill, hands carrying multiple bags. There are other girls following after them, hands full as well.

She nods in greeting, and turns back to her work.

"Here, this is yours," Sayaka says as she shoves something under her nose.

Homura glances down: it's a bentou.

Her hands are caked in gunpowder, and she looks up to see Sayaka gesturing to the box.

She reaches over, grabbing Sayaka's white cape, smearing blackened fingerprints on the fabric with just a light touch.

"Hey!" Sayaka slaps her hand away and steps back. One hand still holding the bentou, her other hand reaches for her cape, turning it around to survey the damage.

Kyouko cackles loudly off to the side; she's handing off dinner to the other girls, but she had a clear view from where she's standing.

Sayaka glares.

Homura ignores her, eyes flickering down to her own white dress.

Surprisingly, or maybe not, considering how careful she is, it's still clean.

"Geez," Sayaka shakes her head. She sighs and offers her cape.

There's a wolf whistle, and Sayaka shoots Kyouko another glare as laughter echoes around.

Her hands are still smeared grey with lingering residue, but she ignores it as she digs into her bentou.

It's a familiar taste, filled with things that could've been her favourite foods.

Someone joins her, sitting to her side.

"Mami made that, by the way," Kyouko tells her as she cracks open her own bentou.

Homura nods. She recognizes her cooking still.

They eat in companionable silence for a moment, but that is unfitting of Kyouko's character and with her usual manners, she points to the fireworks next to Homura with her chopsticks.

"Are those done?" Kyouko asks.

Mouth full, Homura nods.

"We need a few to test the mortar, mind if we use some?"

Homura shakes her head.

"Cool."

As always, Kyouko finishes her food first, and she's clambering to her feet when Homura's not even halfway done.

She watches as Kyouko plucks one shell each from the two piles.

"I'll bring these over," Kyouko says. "Let's see how yours turned out."

There's a challenge in her voice, but Homura shrugs and continues eating.

She's full when Madoka appears next to her.

She turns to face her. "Welcome back, Madoka."

Madoka grins as she takes a seat. "I'm back, Homura-chan."

She ignores her embarrassment, knowing Madoka will make things worse, and gives her a normal kiss.

Madoka smiles. "You're getting used to public display."

Homura shakes her head. "I'm getting used to you."

She offers Madoka a piece of karaage with her chopsticks.

"Well, that's good enough," Madoka says.

She opens her mouth, letting Homura feed her the rest of her bentou.

"Mm, that was pretty good," Madoka tells her when there's no more food left.

Homura looks around. "There's more bentous somewhere."

Madoka waves her away. "I'm okay for now."

There's the sound of a whistle, and everyone turns as the darkened sky lights up as a shower of sparks rain down.

"Test run?" Madoka asks even as she eagerly waits for the next one.

"Mmhmm..."

Madoka leans in close as they watch the sky continue to fill with different designs; some very simple, some arranged into patterns or shapes.

"Are any of those yours, Homura-chan?" Madoka asks, eyes glowing as a flower blooms overhead.

"Not yet," she answers, evaluating the pictures in her mind. "Knowing Sakura Kyouko, mine will most likely be last."

Madoka smiles as a lopsided happy face appears. "What did you make, Homura-chan?"

"... A bomb."

Madoka glances over. "What?"

She points to one of the piles. "Sakura Kyouko took one from each pile. Those... I accidentally mixed in too much gunpowder. Those are bombs."

Madoka grins and places a kiss to her cheek. "And you didn't warn her?"

"I was eating."

"There's two piles though, Homura-chan."

Homura nods.

"...You're not going to tell me, are you?"

She shakes her head.

Madoka sighs, once again leaning against her. "How about a hint?"

"You'll know it when you see it."

The fireworks continue, with duds and broken patterns mixed in with others.

"That wasn't it, was it?" Madoka asks as a complicated design disappears.

Homura shakes her head. "You will know."

Madoka pouts, turning to face her when another whistle sounds as another shell is launched.

Two overlapping hearts appear, pink and purple, surrounded by white sparkles.

Madoka smiles, watching until they fade away. "I love you too, Homura-chan."

Homura turns to her, mouth opening. "I—"

Another whistle, and there's a loud boom echoing as the sky suddenly burns.

Everyone stares in shock at the giant explosion that leaves a cloud of billowing smoke hanging in the air.

Madoka though, starts laughing. "Homura-chan!"

Homura presses her face against Madoka's shoulder, hiding her own smile.

When Kyouko and Sayaka rush over, they're covered in ash and the tips of their clothes and hair are singed.

Madoka takes one look at them, and laughs even harder.

/

She's sleeping in the gazebo, the night sky surrounding her, when Madoka drops in, placing soft kisses to her face to wake her.

Her eyes slowly open as the blurry vision of pink stares down.

Madoka is ready, slipping her glasses onto her face. "Wake up, Homura-chan," she murmurs. "They're just about ready to bloom."

Homura shifts, and as is always the case after she wakes, her body is heavy, and her mind is still half asleep.

Madoka easily lifts her into her arms, stumbling a bit as she makes her way down the stairs. Once on solid ground, her steps are steady as they make their way to the designated plot of land.

Homura leans against her, eyes closing as Madoka navigates through the moonlit path.

"Almost there," Madoka whispers into her ear. "Don't fall back asleep, Homura-chan."

Those words make her force her eyes open.

Soon, they're there, in front of those strange plants that have grown since that day.

They flow together now, a giant mess of green brambles spilling across the land.

The wooden dowels are no longer visible around them, and they're starting to overflow beyond the small shelter Madoka had built.

But, scattered around the prickly vines, are numerous and now large, red coloured buds, lined with a strange white fuzz.

Madoka lowers her to the blanket already laid out, and Homura sits up as Madoka joins her side.

"Madoka...?"

Madoka turns to her with a smile, golden eyes shining. "Hm?"

"...Welcome back," Homura says, leaning forward to kiss her.

"I'm back, Homura-chan," Madoka whispers.

She leans her head against Homura's, facing the plants once more.

"Once a year, they bloom at night," Madoka explains. "For only a few hours, withering before the sun rises..."

There's a light fragrance in the air; like jasmine mixed with gentle vanilla, maybe a bit of sweet cocoa.

Madoka tightens her arm around Homura's waist. Homura turns, just in time to see one of the buds opening.

Madoka smiles. "These... are Mama's favourite flower."

A small intake of breath as a vague memory hits her; Homura finally remembers the significance of the date. "Madoka...?"

"You know," Madoka tells her, voice wavering as emotions start overflowing. "When I was younger, one year, I saved up my allowance for months. It meant no extra snacks after school... which was really hard for a little kid, but... the day before Mother's day, I went to the florist all by myself, and bought this huge bouquet with all my money. I was really shy back then, too, but... I was really, really proud when I managed to go through with it."

Madoka laughs softly as Homura hugs her closer.

"It was a bit early, but when Mama came home that day, I couldn't wait and I gave them to her."

She sighs, swallowing to keep her tears in check.

"She smiled at me," Madoka continues, sniffling softly. "She smiled, accepted them, and then she put them aside. I asked her if she liked them, and she picked me up, hugging me close. And she told me, 'Madoka, of course I love them. Anything from you, Mama will always love.' I was happy, of course, but then, Mama set me on the kitchen counter, and she looked at me sternly, and asked me how much I had spent."

Another laugh.

"I started crying when I thought I was in trouble for buying her flowers; I couldn't understand why she was upset. But she told me..." her voice cracks and Homura reaches over, wiping her tears away with her fingertips. "She told me, 'More than flowers, and more than anything you can buy, Madoka, the best gift for any Mama is seeing their kids grow up. Growing up to become the best person they can be.'"

Madoka gathers her face in her hands, sobbing.

"I-I'm... a horrible daughter," she gasps out. "I-I took that away from her."

Homura grasps Madoka's hands in her own. "Madoka. Madoka, look at me?"

Another sniffle, and when she lifts her head, Homura can see her slightly swollen eyes and tear stained face; this is not the Goddess Madoka in front of her.

This is, Kaname Madoka.

Homura smiles softly, pulling Madoka's hands close to place gentle kisses on her fingers. "Do you really think your Mama would really think that, Madoka?"

"H-Homura-chan...?"

Homura gestures around them. "Look where we're at, Madoka. In a place, created for those who had no other means of salvation. You've helped so many girls... You've helped me. How could your Mama be less than proud of you, for what you have done?"

"But—"

"I've met her, Madoka. I've met Kaname Junko plenty of times. Enough to know that the Mama that raised you, loves you very much. Even if she doesn't remember you, even if you no longer exist by her side, a part of you is still there with her; a part of her is still here, with *you*. And I can assure you, she still loves you very, very much."

Homura watches as Madoka's lips tremble as more tears threaten to spill.

"Do you regret making your wish, Madoka?" Homura asks her softly.

Madoka blinks, tears trailing down her cheeks.

"Are you happy here, Madoka?"

It's a question Homura had asked her once, and this time, Madoka wavers on her answer.

"...I don't know," she replies. "I... I thought everything would be okay," she swallows back the tears, "as long as you were here with me, Homura-chan. But lately... lately you... you haven't been here."

Homura closes her eyes. "I know. I'm sorry, Madoka."

Madoka shakes her head. "No... It's... It's understandable, Homura-chan."

Homura opens her eyes and leans forward, pressing their foreheads together. "I'm really sorry, Madoka."

More tears as Madoka takes in an unsteady breath. "I-It's just hard... you know? Lately, it feels like I'm getting lost in my mind... There's... so many things in there, and sometimes, it takes a bit longer for me to remember who I am. Who I used to be. I feel like... I'm slowly losing myself to this place... How long, until I finally forget...? I love everything, everyone equally. It's... you're the only one who really remembers me, Homura-chan."

Another tear trails down that Homura quickly wipes it away.

"How long until I forget that I love you most...?"

"That's okay, Madoka."

"W-What?"

She looks up, to see Homura smiling at her. "You can forget. You can forget who you are. I'll always be right here, reminding you."

"H-Homura-chan...?"

Homura closes her eyes. "I understand now, why, even after all this time, all my memories are of you, and only you." Lavender opens to stare into gold. "We complete each other. You remind me of who I am. And I am here, to remind you of who you are."

Madoka smiles, a light blush on her cheeks. "You... still say embarrassing things at times, Homura-chan."

Homura nods. "Because Madoka is stubborn, and won't believe me unless I say things like that."

Madoka grins, moving to hug her. "I love you, Homura-chan. More than anything else."

"...I love you too, Madoka."

Madoka glances at her in surprise, and Homura kisses her.

"I love you," Homura repeats.

They both smile and turn to the flowers that are slowly starting to open up.

Madoka sighs, pressing herself close to Homura. "These plants... I planted them because I was starting to forget her... I thought, if I'd see them, if they're physically here, every time I look at them, they'd remind me of Mama."

"Do they?"

Madoka smiles. "Not really. I—knew what kind of flowers Mama liked. But I have never actually seen them before. Anything minus the flowers—it's not much to look at; it doesn't even really fit the rest of the garden. But, that's why Mama liked them so much. 'Beautiful woman under the moon.' Just the name alone, reminds me of her though."

Almost all the buds are open now—the large elegant white flower contrasting against the mess of prickly branches.

Homura turns to her. "Madoka."

"Hmm?"

"We could make your own world."

Madoka faces her. "What?"

Homura nods. "We'll get everyone here, and populate them into another world, similar to the one back there. You can kidnap your family, and your friends, and whoever else, and you can live your life, being 'Kaname Madoka.'"

Madoka stares, before leaning in close. "Oh, yeah? And where will you be, Homura-chan?"

"I will be the ruler, of course. If this is Heaven, then that will be Hell. And I will be the Devil ruling over it."

Madoka smiles and presses a kiss to her lips. "You want to kidnap my family and make me live in Hell, Homura-chan...?"

Homura nods. "Yes. It will be my own rebellion against the laws of the world; despair, and sadness have no place in Hell."

Madoka grins. "Mm... I think you're mixing up a few things there, Homura-chan."

"We could make it happen."

Madoka's eyes search her face, and it takes her a moment when she realizes that Homura is serious. "Homura-chan?"

"You could be happy there, Madoka. Growing up, growing old, with your family. You—"

Madoka cuts her off, kissing her roughly.

"Ma—"

"Mm, less words, Homura-chan..." She pushes her down onto the blanket.

"Mado—"

"If," Madoka's hands are on Homura's shoulders, keeping her in place, "if I'm there, living my life, and you're the ruler, you'd be all alone."

"I don't mind," Homura tells her. "Not for you."

Madoka leans in, hands trailing down. "You don't... but I do... If... If we make another world, I'd want to be there, ruling together with you."

"Mado—"

"A Demon, and a Devil," Madoka whispers, pressing their lips close. "That... doesn't sound bad at al**l."**

AN: Happy Mother's Day, in a *very* round about way.

AN: Happy (Belated) Birthday, Kaname Madoka!

She doesn't even try to hide it; Madoka is all-seeing, after all.

There's scraps of paper scattered, and dusts of glitter in her hair when she feels her sweep through the room.

One glance up for confirmation, before she turns her attention back to her hands, where she's folding a small origami crane; pink, half finished, that will soon join the large pile to her side.

Lips twist into a frown, and hands are around her waist in another moment.

Warm breath against her neck. "I know you saw me, Homura-chan."

Her own lips twitch, and she barely manages to hold back her amusement at the whine she can hear in Madoka's voice.

"Mm," she replies, eyes still concentrated on her task, "welcome back, Madoka."

Three...

Two...

On—

She's turned around, and her protest is cut off as lips press into her own.

Her eyes flutter close, because she could never get tired of *this.*

Seconds, and she's pulled closer; kissed deeper. Until she pushes away, gasping for air.

"M-Madoka...!"

Madoka smiles in response, her own breathing elevated. "That'll teach you to ignore me, Homura-chan..."

Pink blooms on Homura's cheeks as she acknowledges Madoka's grin.

"..." She lowers her gaze to the floor, searching for that incomplete crane she had dropped, trying to hide her embarrassment.

A finger pokes her cheek, and she glances out of the corner of her eye as Madoka settles in besides her, ever careful of the neat pile of cranes nearby.

"Even after all this time, you're still so shy, Homura-chan."

"Mm..."

She finds the wayward origami half submerged in the folds of her dress. Before she can reach for it, it's grasped in deft fingers, and when she raises her head, Madoka is smiling as she holds the crane out to her.

"Here you go, Homura-chan."

"...Thank you, Madoka."

An almost indiscernible weight is placed in her palm. Her eyes flicker down, but there's a gaze still burning into her that forces her to look back up.

"...Did you need something?"

"Hm." Madoka taps her chin with a finger, before her smile widens. "Well..."

Some maneuvering, until Homura now sits in Madoka's lap; it's nothing new, but she still feels it's strange—because she sometimes remembers Madoka as smaller—shorter.

Fourt—

Madoka buries her face into Homura's neck, the soft threads of her pink hair tickling Homura's sensitive skin.

"You smell like cookies, Homura-chan..."

Homura shivers, trying to suppress her reaction; she knows that Madoka is deliberately teasing her.

"I baked, earlier," she responds, leaning back in hopes that Madoka will change gears.

She does.

Light pressure against her head, followed by a soft sigh whispered into her ear. "Really...? You always smell like cookies though... Chocolate, sometimes... Strawberry, if I'm lucky..."

Homura hums in agreement. They fall into silence as she's held, and the gentle breathing heard slows down.

She turns her head: pink strands, and a sharp face lined with fatigue. Her hand creeps up, and she brushes her fingers against Madoka's cheek. Feather light touches, until finally one golden eye cracks open.

"Let's trade spots, Madoka," she says softly.

Arms tighten around her waist as she feels Madoka bury her face into her shoulder. "Nn, but I like holding onto you like this, Homura-chan..."

"You should lie down if you're tired. You can use my lap as a pillow."

"That sounds good too..." Madoka murmurs.

She waits for her to move. "...Madoka?"

"Shhh, teddy bears don't speak, Homura-chan..."

Her lips tug into a small smile. "Okay. Sleep well, Madoka."

"Shhh..."

She turns her attention back to the unfinished crane.

/

Fall, and the seasons are no longer limited to just their private garden.

The area outside is lit with red leaves; like crimson waves hanging in the sky; like fire carpeting the ground.

The telltale crunch with every step.

Sweet potatoes are toasting in layered foliage, and girls are searching for chestnuts that have fallen amongst the sea of acorns.

She's one of the few stoking, and watching the fires. She doesn't feel like running around, and it's chilly enough outside that she's using the fire to keep warm.

She's kneeling, hands held close to the burning leaves when someone joins her.

Her reputation still proceeds her, and there's only a handful of girls who will actually stand next to her.

"The temperature sure has dropped rather quickly," Mami comments as she mimics Homura's actions.

"Mmhmm."

Loud laughter off to their side, and they both turn just in time to see Sayaka dive after Kyouko. She misses, only to slip, and scatter leaves into the air as her body hits the floor. Kyouko's laughing the loudest when an embarrassed Sayaka slowly sits up.

Laughter continues as a few witnesses help Sayaka to her feet.

"You're not going to join them?"

Homura blinks, and turns back to Mami. "...Why would I?"

A smile is offered. "You seem interested."

Another blink, before she reaches for one of the slightly charred sticks resting at her feet. A light shift of the leaves as the fire crackles, as smoke continues to rise.

"...No thanks," she murmurs after she realizes she has yet to respond.

"You should start wearing something warmer soon. It seems the temperature will continue to drop."

She glances down to her light dress: a variation of the one she had worn when she first arrived. Something made for summer.

A gust of wind reminds her of the chill in the air.

"...I should be okay for a bit longer."

A knowing look cast her way that she ignores. "Alright. I'm going to go check on how the chestnut gathering is coming along; hopefully there's more in those baskets than what they're throwing back out. Will you be alright watching the fires by yourself?"

Her grip on the stick slackens as she blinks in surprise. She glances around.

It's just her and Mami, surrounded by burning leaves.

"...Weren't there more girls earlier?"

Mami straightens out to stretch her back. "Yes, but most of them have either gone back inside due to the cold, or have joined Kyouko and Sakura in their chestnut war."

"I see..." Her voice trails off as she turns towards the buildings.

"Ah." Mami smiles. "Well, I can leave then, knowing you won't be by yourself."

When Madoka glides in, dress pulling red leaves to trail after her, Mami has already disappeared through the trees.

"I'm back, Homura-chan."

She stands to accept Madoka in her arms. "Welcome back, Madoka."

She leans forward, kissing Madoka for their usual greeting. She starts pulling away, but stops when Madoka continues to hug her close.

Madoka breathes in deeply: crisp air, mixed with smoke, leaves, and the scent of baked goods that seems to follow Homura around.

She grins, committing the smells to memory. "Sweet potatoes?"

Homura nods. "Yes. They're collecting chestnuts for dinner tonight as well. I requested some to make Mont Blanc later..."

Madoka rests her head on Homura's shoulder and closes her eyes. "Sounds delicious."

"Mmhmm..." Madoka is warm, and she doesn't mind holding her, but the mental clock in her head tells her that the earlier batches are close to being done.

Before she can ask her to move, Madoka extracts herself out of her arms. "I'll help," she tells her with a smile.

"Thank you."

Homura approaches the first pile armed with a stick in her hand. She stares at it blankly; she's never actually roasted sweet potatoes this way, ever, and hadn't been present for the setup.

A small tilt of her head.

Smile still on her lips, Madoka presses a kiss to the side of her cheek. "Here, I'll show you."

"...Thank you." She hands Madoka the branch.

The leaves are gently pushed away, parting as gray smoke billows out. Ash, and burnt dust scatter as she continues to dig through, until the small, concrete enclosure buried beneath the leaves is revealed. The stick brushes against something solid, and they can see the shine of silver peeking out from black soot.

"Aha! There they are!" Madoka grins as she trades the stick for a skewer. "Now, we just need to check if it's cooked..." She glances at Homura. "It's kind of like how you check when cakes are done."

Homura nods.

The sweet potato is soft enough that the skewer passes through the center easily.

"Perfect! I call the first one~!"

Homura smiles when she sees Madoka's brow furrow, obviously trying to figure out which one is the largest.

"Mm, which one, Homura-chan?"

"...You can eat more than one, Madoka."

Madoka bumps her hip. "Which one, Homura-chan?"

She regains her balance, before sighing softly. "Hm."

Lavender roves around, until it lands on a particular large bundle in the corner. She blinks as she remembers something.

She points. "That one."

Madoka does a quick test of the metal tongs now in her hands. "Okay."

She reaches for the one singled out by Homura. Once successfully retrieved, she grins, and brandishes her prize.

Homura holds out a plate, and she places it down.

"Thank you, Homura-chan."

Homura nods, accepting the tongs as she hands Madoka her food.

Madoka's already moving to peel off the foil, when Homura turns to her with a raised eyebrow.

"...Weren't you going to help me?"

"Ouch! Hot!" The heat reaches past her gloves, and Madoka blows air on her fingers to lessen the pain.

"...Never mind."

Madoka pouts. "I-I'll help you after I take a bite!"

A metal snap of the tongs as her reply, before Homura starts transferring the rest of sweet potatoes to empty plates.

She's settling the last one on top when she feels a tug on her dress. Once she's sure it's secure, she turns around to face Madoka.

"Say 'ah', Homura-chan."

She opens her mouth as Madoka tries to feed her.

"Hot!" She pulls back, hand already moving to press into her burned lips.

"Sorry! Are you alright, Homura-chan?"

She licks her lips, feeling the heat, and a small sting. "Yes, I'm fine. I just—didn't expect it to be that hot."

"I'm sorry, I thought I had cooled it down enough. Here, let me see."

She lowers her hand as Madoka leans forward. "I'm fine."

"Looks a bit red. We'll need to apply medicine to it."

She blinks. "Medi—"

A hand against her cheek, before Madoka captures her lips against hers. "Mm..." She smiles, pulling away slightly. "All better?"

Homura clears her throat, moving away as she fixes her glasses back into place. "Y-Yes. A-All better..."

Madoka grins. "Good. Okay, let's try that again."

Homura watches, amused, as Madoka continues to huff and puff onto the sweet potato.

"...I think that should be fine, Madoka."

One last blow of air, before Madoka holds out her hand again. "Say 'ah', Homura-chan."

She opens her mouth, and this time manages to take a bite from the fairly cooled down section.

As soon as Homura is done, Madoka brings the sweet potato back to her mouth.

Mouth full, Madoka looks at her expectantly. "Howswit?"

A slow chew. "Sweet. Potato."

"Ahh! No fair, you two started eating without us! Homura! We had a deal! You said you'd call me as soon as they were done!"

She swallows her bite, ignoring Kyouko. A glance up, and she smiles at Madoka. She reaches over to wipe the stray crumbs from Madoka's lips with her thumb. A lick of her finger, before she turns to Kyouko, who is scouring through the stacks on the plates.

"Hey! Where's mine? I had my name on it!"

Madoka blinks. She lifts the sweet potato in her hand, to where there's half of Kyouko's name still visible on the remaining foil.

"Uhm... Sorry, Kyouko!"

Homura clicks the tongs once more. "It doesn't matter, Madoka. She'll eat more than her fair share, anyways."

Kyouko scowls at Homura. She then turns to Madoka. "S'okay, Madoka. I mean, it's not like you knew..."

Madoka glances to Homura, who's trying her best to hide her smile. Lavender meets gold; raised eyes, and Homura loses the battle.

She quickly turns around with a cough.

"Ouch! Hot!" Kyouko pulls her hand away, shaking it to try and cool it down.

One last look at the sweet potato in her hand, before Madoka shrugs. She takes a big bite, deliberately sticking crumbs to her lips. She reaches out, her fingers once more grasping around white cloth as she tugs Homura's dress.

/

"How about this one, Homura-chan?"

"...Why do you keep choosing such short skirts, Madoka? I'm supposed to be dressing warmer."

Madoka pouts as she slips her arms around Homura's waist. The mirror in front of them shows off Homura's new outfit, and golden eyes trail down.

"But this way you can wear those black tights of yours." She leans forward. "...I like when you wear those tights..."

She's expecting a squeak, or a protest, but when Homura remains quiet, Madoka looks up.

She grins: Homura's frozen in place.

Only when Madoka's hands start moving down, does Homura jump away, face red, all the way to her ears.

"M-Madoka!"

She smiles innocently. "What? I can't appreciate them? I know that sometimes your eyes wander..."

She lifts her leg slightly, and watches as Homura follows her movements.

"See?"

Homura quickly glances away. "T-That..."

"...We're practically married by now, Homura-chan," she says softly, stepping forward until she's close enough to hold Homura close. "...Maybe we should have a wedding ceremony. Make it official." She closes her eyes. "Kaname Homura. Has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Arms rope around her waist. "...I-Is... I mean, d-do... A-Are..."

She can feel Homura shaking in her arms. She opens her eyes, and lifts her hand, gentle, as she presses it into the small of Homura's back.

"You're the only person I'd want to marry, Homura-chan."

"Y-You're..."

Homura buries her face in Madoka's neck, and she's not surprised when she can feel something damp against her skin.

She gently strokes Homura's head. "Is that a no, Homura-chan?"

"O-Of course not!" Homura pulls away.

Gloved hands cup Homura's face. "Of course you won't marry me?"

Hands roughly grip Madoka's as fingers tighten. "O-Of course I'll marry you!"

Madoka smiles. "You will?"

The temperature in the room has risen, and Homura can feel heat creep up her neck. She shyly looks away. "Y-Yes..."

Madoka grins as she throws her arms around her. "Homura-chan."

Homura turns her head just in time to catch Madoka's lips against hers.

Like always, Madoka presses herself closer.

When she finally pulls away, her glasses are crooked, she's breathing heavily, and she feels herself lost in a daze.

"I love you, Homura-chan."

She focuses her eyes, letting them adjust as Madoka fixes her glasses.

Gold, with pink, framing that familiar face.

The same face that haunts her dreams; the one that resides in her nightmares.

She reaches up, her one hand gently placed on Madoka's cheek.

A soft smile, and with tears in her eyes, "I love you, Madoka. I love you, so, so much."

Madoka hugs her close. "Homura-chan..." Her smile warps into a grin. "...Does this mean you'll keep this outfit?"

"...Madoka."

"What? They make your legs look really nice!"

"...Throw in a scarf at least, please."

"Deal!"

\\

She's outside, helping to set up the canopies, and is in the process of tying down one of the posts when a hand slaps her back.

There's more than enough strength behind that hit, and she barrels forward, tripping, and bringing down the rest of the tent with her as she falls.

In between fits of laughter with half hearted apologies, Kyouko digs her out from the wreckage, and sets her to her feet.

"Geez, you'd think with all that baking, you'd add a bit of weight to your body."

Homura readjusts her scarf, trying to force her ears to not turn that shade of red that she just knows they're turning, but the giggles heard nearby, and the looks cast their way makes it hard to do so.

She readjusts her glasses, before showing Kyouko her annoyance as her lips dip into a frown. "Sakura Kyouko."

Hands are held out. "Nevermind that! That was a congratulatory slap!"

"...A what?"

"A congratulatory slap! Because you two will finally tie the knot," Kyouko grins, "and stop living in sin."

Homura rolls her eyes. "How long were you waiting to use that line?" she asks dryly as she crouches, reaching for the canopy once more. "You're helping me set this one back up, by the way."

"Yeah, yeah."

They work in tandem, Kyouko setting the poles as Homura ties them down.

"There, good as new." Kyouko tests their weight, shaking it roughly.

To Homura's relief, it remains standing.

"Anyways, the news is slowly making its way down the grapevine; I'd say you have until dinner, before everyone knows."

Homura starts unraveling another canopy to set up. "That's... well, I expected it."

Kyouko joins her side, helping to unroll the cloth tarp. "Y'know, I'm surprised you two didn't marry earlier. Put those rumors to rest. Who popped the question, anyways?" She glances over, and Homura is keeping her eyes glued to the floor.

"...Madoka."

"Well, can't say I'm surprised. Even after everything, you're still the same, shy little geek on the inside."

Homura shoots her a glare. She remains quiet, because she can't deny that fact.

Kyouko flashes her a fanged grin. "But, yeah, Mami is busy tripping all over herself; I think she's more excited than you about this."

"Mm..."

Kyouko's hands pause. "Hey, you do want to marry her, right?"

Homura blinks. "What? Why wouldn't I?"

Kyouko shrugs, before standing as she holds two poles in her arms. "Call it a hunch, but it's probably the same reason why you're always afraid to make the first move."

Back facing her, Kyouko doesn't see Homura bow her head.

"Well, whatever problems you got, it doesn't really matter, 'cause you already said yes, and you two are already married, anyways." Kyouko steps forward, but suddenly turns back. "Oh, by the way, Sayaka doesn't approve."

Homura raises an eyebrow as she stands. "What?"

"That's what she says, anyways. Y'know, that whole thing, with Madoka being her wife, or whatever. She just wants to mess with you."

"Oh. Uhm... alright, thanks, for the heads up..."

"Though, she's kind of serious. So, maybe you should start practicing or something."

"...for what?"

Kyouko grins. "She's gonna challenge you to win the Goddess' hand in marriage."

Homura places a hand to her forehead. "...Let me guess, she's going to do this during the festival."

"You got less than a week, and judging by how easily I slapped you, I'd say you should fill up on cakes, or at least get Madoka to enchant you or something, otherwise you're gonna get your butt kicked."

A small sigh. "...so, magic will be allowed?"

Kyouko shrugs. "No idea, but I won't say anything."

"...Great."

\\

She's waiting as the chestnuts boil when Mami storms in.

"Homura! Great! You're here today! Listen, I brought some references for you to go through."

She blinks as a stack of books are dropped on top of the small glass table.

"Uhm, references for what?"

Mami pulls the first book over. "Dresses, silly. And for decorations, center pieces, flowers, things like that."

"Wha—"

The cover is flipped open, and Homura pales when she sees an alarming number of coloured papers on the edges of every book.

"Uhm, it's—"

"Now, first off, what kind of wedding do you plan to have?"

"W-What?"

Mami turns to her with a small huff. "Homura! Haven't you looked into this at all? Western style, or a more traditional style?"

"Uhm," her brow furrows, "I-I'm sure Madoka wants to wear a dress...?"

"Excellent! I was thinking the same, but I wanted to make sure first." She flips a few pages. "Now, this one here," her finger points to a dress in the corner, "seems like it would go along with your body line. A simple cut, but still stylish."

"U-Uh huh...?"

"Or maybe this one." Mami taps on a dress pictured on the next page. "I really like how the sleeves flare out here, don't you agree?"

"Uhm..."

"This one seems to be really popular; I took a few polls, and so far this seems to be the one the other girls want to see you wearing."

"Polls...?"

"And this one, over here, is the one they want to see Madoka wearing. Of course, it doesn't mean that you two won't have a choice, just that I think you'd agree that both these dresses seem to almost fit you two perfectly."

Her mental clock tells her the chestnuts are done, and she quickly stands to her feet. "Uhm, t-there's, I need to c-check on something..."

Mami shadows her, following her into the kitchen, and continues to rattle into her ear as she sets about her preparations.

When she feels Madoka enter the room, she rushes towards her, hands still covered in flour.

"W-Welcome back, Madoka!"

"I'm back, Homu—Oof!"

"Save me," Homura whispers into her ear.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura turns, and nods towards Mami who has two books clutched in her hands as she emerges from the kitchen.

"Madoka! Good, you're back! I was just discussing with Homura the coloured streamers you should place above the columned pillars."

"The what?" Madoka briefly glances to Homura, who merely shakes her head.

"The columned pillars that you will set up along the aisle! It'll go great with the marble flooring for the dance area."

"Uhm..."

Homura hugs Madoka close. "I-It's been an hour now; she's shown me 10 different dresses, but they all look the same..."

Madoka grins, looping her arm around Homura's waist. She presses a kiss to the side of her head. "Alright, leave this to me," she murmurs.

She straightens out.

"...and I was thinking of having a sort of, 'Goddess' theme, mixed with—"

Madoka clears her throat, effectively cutting Mami off. "Mami?"

"Yes?"

"...Uhm, seeing as you're already so... well-versed in wedding planning, I'll leave most of the things to you."

Homura buries her face into Madoka's shoulder, prompting Madoka to press her hand against her back.

"The only things that I want control of, are our wedding dresses, our vows, and the song chosen for the first dance. You can have free reign over everything else; I leave the wedding plans to you."

Mami blinks rapidly. "Are you sure, Madoka?

She nods. "I know you're perfectly capable of planning something amazing."

Homura lifts her head—and isn't surprised to find Mami beaming.

"Oh, thank you, Madoka! I definitely won't let you down! This is—I just—"

With a grin, Madoka holds out her free hand. "Calm down, Mami. Take a deep breath," she gestures, and Mami does as told, "okay, now exhale."

Mami breathes out.

Madoka nods. "Good. Anyways, you, can uhm, go do your planning, and you can get any of the other girls to help you as well."

Homura presses her face against Madoka when she sees how ecstatic Mami looks.

"Of course!" Mami gushes, immediately reaching for Madoka's hand. She grips it tightly, her own lighter eyes shining. "You two will have the absolute, most beautiful wedding possible!"

Madoka smiles. "Thank you, Mami." She gently nudges Homura.

"...Thanks."

"Oh, I need to go talk with the others, and—and I need to—"

Madoka nods, gently extracting her hand. "If there's anything you need to bring up to us, you can send me a message. But, Homura and I will be a bit busy in the mean time, so can you tell the others that our room will be off limits for a while?"

"Oh, of course! I'll leave those books over there for you to browse through!" Mami points to the large stack. "They're marked, and I have notes written down for references."

"Thank you again, Mami."

"Yes, of course," Mami responds.

To their surprise, she suddenly rockets forward and her arms surround the both of them.

"I'm really, really happy for you two," she whispers softly.

Madoka smiles, and returns the hug as Homura awkwardly remains squished in between.

Mami pulls away, and she and Madoka share a grin. "Congratulations, you two."

"Thank you."

The clicks of her heels as she leaves the room, and Homura finally moves away from Madoka with a sigh of relief.

"That was..."

Madoka grins. "Intense? Have you forgotten how passionate Mami gets when she's in 'senpai' mode?" she teases.

Homura shakes her head.

"Aw, was my poor little Homura-chan scared?"

A small sigh as Homura brushes her hair back.

"Mm, anyways..." Madoka's grin softens into a smile as she slips her arms around Homura's waist. "I'm back, Homura-chan."

Homura leans forward, her lips meeting Madoka's halfway. "Welcome back, Madoka," she murmurs.

Madoka rests her forehead against hers, their noses barely touching. "Homura-chan?"

"Hm?"

"...I'm sorry, was that alright?"

She blinks, pulling away. "What?"

"I mean, giving Mami control over our wedding. I'm not... I mean, it's..."

"Oh." She shakes her head. "That's fine. It's... more than perfectly fine, actually. Saves us the trouble of having to look through everything..."

"Mm... but that's supposed to be one of those things that people look forward to. Planning the wedding... settling on the cake, compromising on the decorations... Matching colour schemes, and..." Madoka trails off, finding Homura now watching her closely.

"...Did you want to do all that, Madoka?" she asks quietly.

Madoka smiles, gathering Homura's hands in hers. She lifts her left arm, stretching it out to the side, Homura's arm against hers as she continues to hold Homura's hand. She places Homura's right hand onto her shoulder, before sliding hers down to rest against Homura's back.

Wordlessly, she glides to the side, smiling wider when Homura follows without protest.

"I remember," she says softly, body now swaying with music only she can hear, "when I was younger, looking through photo albums with Mama... I remember how happy Mama looked as she explained each photograph of their wedding."

She closes her eyes, continuing to move with Homura as they lazily dance across the floor.

"A special day, dedicated to just the two of them. To celebrate their marriage."

She opens her eyes, smiling at Homura who's still staring.

She leans forward. "But... every day here is special. Because I'm with you, Homura-chan."

Homura blushes at her honest words. "Madoka..." She averts her eyes. "Y-You're..."

"Mama always did say that one of the biggest dreams a girl could ever have was to plan her own wedding..."

Homura glances up, eyes searching Madoka's face.

And it's not the first time she sees something that's usually buried deep inside.

"Madoka..."

Golden eyes flicker to lavender, before Madoka closes the distance in between them, capturing Homura's lips in her own. Hands tug her closer, and Homura can feel something almost desperate in her kiss; seeking reassurance, wanting the comfort that she's here.

She presses back, and Madoka matches her intensity, unwilling to submit.

Arms loops around her waist, and Homura vaguely realizes she's being lifted.

A gasp for breath as she finds herself lowered to the floor.

"Homura-chan..."

Hands trail down her body, fingers seeking skin.

Golden eyes, almost shining darker—like light amber.

Homura reaches forward, hand gently cupping Madoka's face. "I love you."

Madoka smiles, her hand wrapping around Homura's. "I know. I love you too, Homura-chan."

She leans down, eyes half closed.

A gentle breath against her cheek, disappearing as lips press into hers.

/

It's a clear autumn day.

Blue skies dotted with scattered clouds.

Red still blankets the trees; still lines the ground.

The air is cool against her skin, and she readjusts her jersey collar, before pushing her ponytail back.

"Homura, catch!"

She turns as a flash of white is thrown at her. She catches cloth in her hands, blinking as the owner of a familiar shade of blue saunters to her side.

"Yo! Practicing hard, I see," Sayaka says as she offers her a water bottle.

"Mm," she replies, accepting the drink even though the water station is a small distance away. "Thanks," she murmurs, fingers already moving to untwist the cap.

"Yeah." Sayaka turns to her own opened bottle, and they both chug down their water in silence.

As soon as she sees Homura lower her drink, Sayaka glances to her.

"Kyouko told you, right?"

Homura replaces the cap, eyes staring at the bottle. Finally, she looks up to match that crystal blue gaze.

"Yes."

"I'm serious, you know? Madoka..."

She wraps the towel around her neck, head tilting up, towards the sky. "Yes."

There's a hand gripping her arm, forcing her attention back down. "...We had our problems, back then."

Back then, and so long ago.

"And, I know, she's happy with you. That you're," Sayaka sighs, "...maybe you're the only one here, that really understands what she's going through."

She continues staring. Waiting.

"But," Sayaka shakes her head, "...I just want to make sure."

"...That?"

Sayaka lets go. "We'll be divided into teams, and most of the groups will be randomly selected. There will be individual scores though. If you're even 100 points close to mine, I'll accept you."

Homura blinks, but Sayaka is already turning around with a wave.

She stops, glancing over her shoulder. "At your current rate, I'd say you'd be lucky to even be close to 500 points."

Homura's fingers tighten, and plastic crinkles under her grip.

She turns, and stares towards the tracks for a moment, watching as others racers circle along the course.

Her best time is still too many seconds behind Sayaka's.

She deposits her belongings off to the side, before she approaches the starting line once more.

Whether or not she thinks this competition is ridiculous, she knows that she still has something to prove.

A slow count in her mind as she lowers her body to ready position.

Three—

Two—

She sends her body forward, feet pounding on the ground.

And maybe—

—and she knows this, deep, deep down—

that just maybe, she's not good enough, after all.

/

It's more than a change of seasons, and more like a month long celebration.

The hallways in particular are decorated with pink, and accented with purple.

In dedication; in reminder.

There's an informal party held in one of the new banquet halls.

Tables overflowing with food.

Praises ever flowing; a constant stream as they bow in front of their Goddess.

She has her rightful place against her side, and more often than not, the words are directed towards her as well.

She offers a polite smile that slowly wanes as the night continues; that all but fades when Madoka disappears to fulfill her duties.

There's a tap against her head, and she's not surprised when she turns to see a Kyouko with her mouth full. Kyouko swallows her food, before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

"You know, after this summer, I thought you were really starting to warm up to everyone."

Homura pokes at her half eaten pudding with her spoon, merely responding with a slight shift of her shoulders.

"...It seemed like you were really starting to fit in. So, what's up?"

She shoves a spoonful of dessert into her mouth to avoid a response.

"What's it? Pre-wedding jitters? The Goddess' soon to be wife has cold feet?"

She forces down the bite, washing it down with water.

A hand is roughly on her shoulder, gripping her dress tightly enough that the one sleeve slips off.

"Seriously, Homura. I thought you were past this."

"Past what?"

Calmly, Kyouko removes the pudding and spoon from her hands to place them on the table.

Not a second later, she shoves Homura, and there's a rattle as her back hits the chair.

She knows that everyone's watching; can feel as Mami's presence steps closer.

"How the hell should I know what goes on in that stupid little head of yours?"

Kyouko is now griping her dress front, and she finds herself lifted off her seat.

"Back then, it was always something. Even not too long ago, you were getting lost in your mind. You two love each other so much—it's almost suffocating to be in the same room. So why are you always—"

"Kyouko."

Kyouko growls, trying to shrug off the hand on her shoulder. "Not now, Mami."

"Not *here,*" Mami hisses.

It's enough of a distraction, and she's long gone before they even realize that she had activated her magic.

The hallways are empty, and her footsteps echo behind her as she walks through.

A celebration.

She presses her hand into her sternum, forcing her tears back.

Happy B—

\\

She knows, really, that the problem is her all along.

But she's the only one who sees it—those traces of lingering sadness behind Madoka's eyes.

That yearning for something that she can taste on her lips.

Months—maybe years, and she still knows that if she had the choice, she'd give this all up for her.

But the problem is, she can't become a Devil.

She's still too weak on the inside; too clingy; too dependent on this Goddess that rules this eternity.

The Madoka that rules her heart.

She glides into their shared room, footsteps not slowing as she heads towards the kitchen, her goal, her mind on one single thing.

Two glasses are pulled out, followed by a familiar bottle that has remained untouched to this day.

She stomps towards the table, and all but slams the cups down when she takes a seat.

Eternity is happiness, yet happiness is still bitter.

She pours herself a glass, filling the one next to it once it's full.

A toast as glasses clink together, before she tilts her head back and downs everything in one single gulp.

She chokes, the alcohol burning her throat, stray droplets running down her chin.

She ignores it, and pours herself another one.

Two.

Three.

Four.

She'd be eighteen today.

Five.

Six.

Sev—

/

She already knows that something's wrong; had felt it even before whatever had happened.

There are no pit stops when she returns, and their room is her first destination.

Through the doorway, and the sweet smell that she has come to think of as 'home,' is drowned out by the stench of alcohol.

She can see her figure lying besides the table, black hair pooled around her, a small glimpse of red hidden beneath.

She pauses as a memory hits her.

But it's not her Mama in front of her house, and her Papa isn't there, asking her to help carry her inside.

It's Homura, and something clenches her heart as she continues to walk closer.

"Homura-chan?"

She doesn't stir, and golden eyes flicker to the table: one empty glass, one full. A bottle that's almost empty.

She breathes out slowly.

When she's beside her, she lowers herself to the ground, before easily lifting Homura's head, to place it into her lap.

"Homura-chan?" Her hands gently fix her hair back into place. "Homura-chan?" she strokes her cheek lightly, blinking back her own tears. "Homura-chan...?" her voice cracks at the end, and she stubbornly wipes at her eyes.

Homura moves, and finally, unfocused eyes open. "...Madoka?"

Homura, who should smell like cookies, and cake, and chocolate, and strawberry.

She fixes Homura's glasses. "It's me, Homura-chan."

"Madoka...?" Homura reaches out clumsily, eyes squinting as she tries to distinguish pink from gold. "Y-You're back..."

She intercepts Homura's hand, gripping it tightly. "Of course, Homura-chan. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I dreamt..." Homura whispers softly, "I dreamt you disappeared... t-that you left me, all alone... N-No one else remembered you, n-not even your family..."

Madoka brings her hand to her cheek, before kissing her fingertips. "Don't be silly, Homura-chan. I'd never leave you."

"...P-Promise?"

"Of course."

Homura pulls her hand away, only to hold up a trembling pinky towards her face. "P-Pinky promise!"

Madoka smiles, and connects her pinky with Homura's. "'Pinky promise, if I lie, I will drink 1000 needles, and cut my pinky.'"

Homura tries to repeat her words, slurring and mixing them instead.

Madoka understands though, and gently runs her hands through Homura's hair. "Homura-chan?"

"H-Hm...?"

"...I'm sorry."

Even through her haze, Homura shifts, trying to sit up, and fails miserably. "W-Why? Y-You h-have nothing to apologize f-for, Madoka."

"...Don't I, though?"

Homura tries to reach for her cheek and misses, catching air instead. She frowns, eyes squinting as she tries to focus. "Y-You're... I s-should... e-everything's my fault..."

"Homura-chan?"

"I-If I had been strong enough-I c-could have, I s-should've been the one—" she chokes down her sob. "I-I'm sorry, Madoka. I-I couldn't s-save you..."

"Shhh." Madoka leans down, until her forehead presses against Homura's. "You have nothing to apologize for, Homura-chan."

"I-I w-wanted to wish you a Happy Birthday. I n-never got the chance to. I-I'm sorry."

"Shhh." Madoka places a hand on Homura's cheek. "You did, Homura-chan. This morning, you wished me a Happy Birthday. Don't you remember?"

"I'm sorry," Homura whispers, her eyes closing, "I'm s-sorry."

Madoka knows that Homura isn't apologizing to her; that she sees Madoka, the first Madoka. The one Madoka that still holds her heart.

They are the same, and yet they are not.

She presses a kiss to Homura's forehead, before straightening up. "Go to sleep, Homura-chan."

Lavender struggles to remain open. "W-Will... w-will you be here, when I wake up...?"

She brushes the bangs from Homura's face. "I will."

"P-Promise...?"

"I promise."

Homura's eyes slowly droop close. "Y-You promised, o-okay...?"

"I promise."

"O-Okay... d-don't forget..."

"I won't, Homura-chan. I promise."

"O-Okay..."

Once she's sure that Homura's asleep, does she finally let her own shoulders slump.

She grits her teeth, hands brushing away the tears.

"I'm sorry, Homura-chan."

/

She wakes to a pounding headache, and to warmth pressed close against her.

A gentle breath against her neck, and she forces her eyes open, trying to push past the fog in her mind.

It's Madoka wrapped around her, and yet, fear grips her heart as she pats her back, touching her, making sure she's real.

Madoka stirs, pink strands moving with her as she opens her eyes.

"Homura-chan?"

"M-M—" Her throat feels like sandpaper. She winces, eyes furrowing at the bitter taste still lingering in her mouth.

"How are you feeling?" A breathy whisper against her ear.

"L-Like..." Her head protests, and she closes her eyes, burying her face into Madoka's neck.

A soft laugh. "Mama always did say that hangovers are the worst. Here, let me help."

Hands are against her back, and Homura sighs in relief when most of the pain disappears. "T-Thank you..."

"Mmhmm..."

They remain lying there, Homura, trying to remember yesterday, Madoka, patiently waiting.

Homura sighs. "I'm sorry..."

Madoka runs her hands through Homura's hair. "For what, Homura-chan?"

"F-For..." There's large gaps in her mind, which scares her more than anything. She's used to large holes in her memories, but these are empty ones that are recent, of yesterday.

She swallows the lump in her throat.

"F-For..."

"Mm. It was kind of interesting, seeing a drunk Homura-chan."

She tenses, afraid of what she had done. "I—"

"It was kind of cute though, when you kept telling me that I was small enough to keep in your pocket."

She sits up, and Madoka is smiling at her, her face reflecting the amusement in her voice.

"...Until I realized you were trying to summon your buckler, and you wanted to keep me inside it."

Her cheeks colour. "I'm so sorry, Madoka. W-Whatever I did yesterday, or whatever I said, I apologize."

Madoka sits up. "Homura-chan."

"Y-Yes?"

"You drank, last night."

She bows her head. "...Yes."

"...Can I ask why?"

Her hands are in her lap, and she grips her dress in shaky hands. "I-I don't remember," she lies as she glances away.

"You don't?"

She keeps her mouth closed as Madoka leans closer.

"You finished off most of the bottle, Homura-chan."

Her fingers tighten.

"...Did it help, Homura-chan?"

She sucks in a breath, before she slowly shakes her head. "N-No..."

"...Do you not want to marry me?"

"N-No! Y-Yes! I mean, I-I don't—" she closes her eyes, head now bowed. "I want to marry you, Madoka! I-I want to marry you, s-so much! I w-want to be w-with you, f-forever, and I—" she hiccups, her hands angrily wiping at her tears, "b-but I don't deserve you. I d-don't deserve to marry you!"

Madoka tries to grab her hands, and Homura pushes her away.

"I d-don't deserve t-this! I d-don't deserve a-anything, o-or anyone—"

It's rare, that Madoka shows her powers towards Homura. Rarer for her to be angry.

But there's strength behind her eyes as she grips Homura's wrists roughly, and forces her to the floor.

"Homura-chan, look at me. *Look at me*."

Homura is shaking underneath her, and it breaks her heart to see—to be reminded of just how broken she is, and that no matter what she has done—she still can't *fix* her.

"You," she grits her teeth as her own tears fall, "how can you say that?" she whispers, her own voice catching in her throat. "How can you say that about yourself? T-That you don't deserve to be *happy*? I know you're happy here, Homura-chan! You make me happy! W-We're," she lets go, bowing her head until it's resting against Homura's shoulders, "w-we're happy here, aren't we, Homura-chan...?"

"M-Madoka...?"

"I-I want to believe that everyone's happy here, but I-I know, some of the girls still cry at night. I c-can change the time, and I c-can change the weather... I c-can make everything how I want it to be. T-This is supposed to be paradise, but lately, i-it feels more like a prison, than a home."

Homura tentatively lifts her arms, until they're wrapped around Madoka's waist. "M-Madoka...?"

Madoka sobs loudly. "I-I'm not a Goddess. I'm just—some stupid girl, who thought she could save everyone."

Homura tries to sit up, even though Madoka is on top of her.

It doesn't work.

She instead tries to settle Madoka down to rest against her, holding her close.

"D-Don't say that, Madoka! Y-You're not—"

"I can't e-even save you, Homura-chan."

"I'm—"

"Sayaka, and Kyouko and Mami... Everyone... I'm... I'm not... I—"

"S-Stop it! Stop talking about yourself that way! Y-You're supposed—"

"What, Homura-chan?! What am I supposed to be?! What am I supposed to do?! What—"

Homura grips her tightly. "I-I don't know! Y-You're K-Kaname Mado—"

"Kaname Madoka doesn't exist anymore!" One hand pounds on Homura's chest, but the dull pain is nothing compared to the one in her heart. "K-Kaname Madoka—doesn't exist anymore..."

Homura tries again, and this time manages to sit up. She pulls Madoka into her lap. "T-Then..." She hugs Madoka close. "T-Then you're not her."

Madoka lifts her head, golden eyes filled with tears as she stares at Homura. "W-What...?"

"Y-You're not Kaname Madoka... a-and, m-maybe I'm—I'm not Akemi Homura."

"Homura-chan...?"

"T-The Kaname Madoka I knew," Homura swallows heavily, "...is not you."

Madoka presses her hands against her. "I k-know that! I know—I'm not the s-sa—"

"But..." Homura gently strokes her head, "the one that I love, t-the one I see in front of me," she leans forward, kissing Madoka's forehead, "is you."

"H-Homura-chan...?"

"A-Akemi Homura stopped existing, a long, long time ago. I'm no longer that girl, e-even though she's still a part of me." Homura gives her a small smile. "It's... the same with you too, Madoka." She gently cups Madoka's cheek, her thumb gently stroking her face. "Kaname Madoka stopped existing, but," she lowers her hand to rest against Madoka's chest, "she's still a part of you."

Madoka blinks, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

"I'm..." Homura takes a deep breath, "I'm, s-slow, and clumsy, a-and, prone to loneliness and self doubt... b-but," she glances away, cheeks turning pink before she turns back, "...I'm confident, in the fact that I love you the most."

"Homura-chan..."

"And, maybe i-it's time I started living again, not as who I've become, but to who I want to be." Homura reaches forward, both hands now resting on the side of Madoka's face. "Madoka, w-will you marry me?"

Madoka's eyes widen.

"W-We'll start over. W-Will you," Homura licks her lips nervously, "w-will you become my wife? B-Become Akemi Madoka...?"

Madoka lifts her hand, placing it on Homura's as her eyes close. Tears slowly trickle down as a smile blooms across her lips.

She opens her eyes. "Yes, I'll marry you, Homura-chan." She leans forward, sealing her proposal with a kiss. "I'll," she breathes out, eyes opening briefly, before they once again close, "I'll gladly become Akemi Madoka."

"Mado—mmfh!"

Madoka grins, pushing Homura down. "I love you, Homura-chan."

"I love y—mmph! M-Mado—!"

"Less talking, Homura-chan..."

\\

She's stretching her legs, trying her best to ignore the eyes that are watching her every move.

Madoka is next to her, and she knows half the attention is concentrated on her as well.

She glances to her side, smiling at the strange sight of Madoka dressed in something other than her all encompassing white dress.

She does miss that ever visible section of skin, but her eyes wander down, to where most of Madoka's legs are exposed beneath her shorts. Smooth, and a tad shade darker than hers...

"Ahem."

Lavender quickly shoots up, her ears turning pink as she realizes she had been caught staring.

"Like what you see, Homura-chan?" Madoka places a hand on her hip, waggling her eyebrows as she straightens her back.

For once, her long, pink hair is tied in a ponytail, and there's a white headband tied around her head. A white t-shirt, topped with a red jacket, and red shorts that leave very little to the imagination.

Homura blinks as she's tapped lightly on her forehead.

Madoka laughs softly as Homura turns that adorable shade of red. She reaches forward, pressing her body against Homura's.

"But, I like what I see, too," Madoka whispers into her ear.

Homura squeaks when a hand is placed a bit lower than her liking.

She jumps away as Madoka grins.

"M-Madoka!"

"What?"

"W-We're, there's," Homura glances around, "t-there's—"

Madoka steps forward. "There's what, Homura-chan...?"

Homura recognizes that look. She takes a step back. "W-We're in public...?" her eyes nervously dart around, trying to find the easiest escape.

"Uh huh...?"

Homura swallows heavily. "A-And I love you...?"

Madoka smiles even as she takes another step forward. "I love you too, Homura-chan."

Homura dashes away, trying to throw Madoka off by feigning to the right, before running to the left.

Madoka easily changes direction, and chases after her.

Everyone watches—and everyone winces when Madoka tackles Homura, their bodies crashing into a pile of leaves that had been swept off to the side.

"M-Madoka-! T-That's, s-stop!"

Kyouko coughs into her hand, before she tilts her head at Sayaka. "You sure you want to get in between that?"

"W-What are—d-don't—pull—on my jacket!"

Sayaka sighs. "What happened to my innocent little Madoka...?"

"M-Madoka! G-Give me back my—W-What are—STOP THAT!"

Mami clears her throat. "Perhaps, we should give them a bit of privacy...?"

Kyouko points her thumb towards the other girls who are watching very closely. "Tell that to those voyeurs over there."

Sayaka sighs, before she claps once. "Alright, there's nothing to see here! Wait—are you taking pictures?!"

/

She curls her body in, trying to minimize exposed skin against the biting cold.

Madoka hugs her closer, smiling down at Homura who she can tell is already half asleep.

The large bonfire in front of them burns brightly, shadowed figures surrounding it, some watching, some dancing.

It had been a day filled with nostalgia; a day where she actually felt almost normal for once.

"Here you go, Madoka."

Madoka turns to accepts the cup of tea from Sayaka. "Thank you, Sayaka."

Sayaka settles besides her, glancing down at Homura who acknowledges her with a brief glance, before burying her face in Madoka's chest.

Madoka is watching her, and Sayaka sighs.

"She won," Madoka tells her.

"...Only because they combined your scores."

Madoka grins behind her cup. "Homura-chan's not exactly the athletic type, Sayaka." She takes a sip.

"...Neither were you."

"Mmhmm," she agrees easily. "But we still won. And, even if they hadn't averaged my score with Homura-chan's, she was only 200 points behind you."

Sayaka sips at her own drink, letting the tea warm her against the autumn evening. "...True."

Madoka turns to her, and Sayaka can see the fire dancing in her eyes. "Does that mean you'll let me marry her?"

She exhales, knowing it's not the reflection from the bonfire she sees. "...Are you happy with her, Madoka?"

Madoka hugs Homura tightly. "Very."

"Then, yes, you have my permission." She closes her eyes, tilting her head back. "I, Miki Sayaka, relinquish all claims to making you my wife, Madoka."

Madoka smiles. "Sayaka-chan?"

Her eyes open at the familiar nickname. "Yeah?"

"It's... I've known you the longest... and..."

Sayaka gently taps her on the arm. "Come on, what are you acting so shy for? You know you can ask me anything."

"...Would you walk me down the aisle? For our wedding, I mean?"

Sayaka blinks. "Y-You want me to walk you down the aisle...?"

Madoka offers her a sheepish grin. "Well, I mean, you kind of fit the role...?"

Sayaka ropes her arm around her shoulder. "Yeah, of course I'll walk you down the aisle!" She glances down to Homura, who's obviously asleep. "She's a lucky girl to have you, you know."

"I'm lucky too."

Sayaka leans her head against Madoka's. "...There was a point in time when I'd be denying it, but... Yeah. You too."

Madoka grins, waiting until she sees Sayaka taking another sip, before dropping her question.

"...So, how are things going with Kyouko?"

Sayaka chokes on her tea, sputtering as liquid dribbles down her chin. She quickly wipes it away with her hand.

"W-What—"

Madoka hums, closing her eyes. "Even though Homura-chan and I will be the first to be married here, it doesn't mean we'll be the last." She opens her eyes, grinning, as Sayaka's face seems to be dyed redder than the fire's light. "If you want, Sayaka-chan, I'll walk you down the aisle, too."

"Sayaka!"

They both turn, to where Kyouko is waving at them, trying to gesture Sayaka over.

Madoka bumps her shoulder. "Go get 'er, tiger."

Sayaka throws her a glare. "I-It's not like that!"

Madoka raises her eyebrows. "It's not?"

"No!"

She leans closer. "Are you sure?"

Sayaka sputters once more. "Y-Yes! Me, and Kyouko... we're—"

"...If you're worried about Mami, I think you have an equal chance with her as well."

Sayaka whirls on her, eyes wide. "Madoka!"

Homura covers her ears with her hands. "...You're so loud..."

Madoka smiles. "Sorry, Homura-chan."

One lavender eye cracks open to survey her surroundings, before it closes once more. "...What's Miki Sayaka whining about now?"

"I'm not whining!"

"She says that she and Kyouko aren't 'like that.'"

"Mm..." Homura presses her face against Madoka's chest. "...They aren't? Because of Tomoe Mami?"

"T-There's nothing between us!"

"...You do know that Madoka knows everything, right?"

"Y-Yeah? Well, she's wrong about me and Kyouko! And wrong about me and Mami!"

"...You hear that, Madoka...? You're wrong about them..." Homura murmurs, voice getting softer.

Madoka grins. "I heard, Homura-chan."

"...Maybe, they need to recheck your Goddess license..."

Madoka strokes her head, smiling in amusement. "Goodnight, Homura-chan."

"...Good...night..."

Sayaka huffs loudly.

"...Shhh..."

"Whatever."

"Hey, we gonna dance, or what?"

Sayaka jumps with a loud scream as Kyouko appears besides them.

"Nn..." Homura clumsily reaches for Madoka's arm, trying to use it to block out the sound.

"K-Kyouko!"

Kyouko raises her hands. "S-Sayaka!" she drawls out.

Madoka leans down to hide her laugh.

Sayaka quickly clears hear throat. "D-Did you need something?"

"Yeah, they're short on dance partners, so I volunteered you." Kyouko grabs her arm, pulling her to her feet.

"...Oh."

Crimson flickers over briefly. "Uh, but, I don't really remember this dancing stuff, so uh, could you teach me how it goes first? B-Before, you know...?"

A small grin appears on Sayaka's face as she gives Kyouko a smug expression. "What? The great Kyouko doesn't know how to folk dance?"

"S-Shut up! It's not like I really had the chance to do this kind of stuff..."

Sayaka links their elbows together. "Yeah, I'll teach you. Come on." She starts dragging Kyouko away.

"Uh—h-hey, I can walk by myself—"

"Oh, stop complaining! Knowing you, you'll try and run once you trip over your feet or something!"

"Will not!"

"Will too!"

"Will not!"

"Will too!"

Homura sighs, her eyes opening as she listens to their bickering fade away. "...Do they not realize they're the next couple on the poll named 'most likely to be married'?"

Madoka grins. "...I placed a bet that their wedding would be in February."

Homura rubs her eyes, slowly sitting up, before she rests her head on Madoka's shoulder. "Mm, isn't that against the rules...?"

"Well, it's not like I actually added to the pool; everyone would end up changing theirs to match mine. If no one wins though, I get half the winnings."

"...Shouldn't that be against the rules?"

Madoka slips her arm around Homura's waist. "Mm, my paradise, my rules."

"You're going to turn into a dictatorship with that kind of thinking, Madoka."

"You're saying that like it's a bad thing, Homura-chan."

Homura closes her eyes. "...Yeah, that wouldn't be that bad at all..." She gently nudges Madoka's shoulder with her face, ignoring how her glasses are now lopsided. "Today was fun, minus all the running."

Madoka laughs. "There was only running, Homura-chan!"

"Not true. The ball toss was fun."

"Only because you starting throwing them at Sayaka-chan."

"She started it."

"We're both on the same team, Homura-chan!"

"You joined in though..."

Madoka tightens her arms around her. "Because you were losing! I couldn't leave my fiancee to fend for herself."

Homura glances at her. "...But, today was fun."

Madoka nods, closing her eyes as she presses her face against Homura's head. "Uh huh. Really, really fun."

"...Can I just sleep in tomorrow?"

Madoka grins, her eyes opening. She pulls away to show Homura her raised eyebrow. "Homura-chan."

"We're not even participating in anything tomorrow," Homura protests weakly. "Autumn's the season of books, but I haven't read a single one."

"Just bring one with you; I'll let you rest in my lap as we watch."

Homura groans.

"Shush you little grouch. It's your responsibility to watch over everyone with me. Especially when I'm called away."

"...I'll trade places with you."

Madoka leans down. "You will, will you?"

Homura nods. "Yes."

"And, how exactly will that work?"

"...Magic?"

"Whose...?"

"Uhm... n-not mine...?"

Madoka squeezes Homura's side, and she jumps in response.

"I was kidding!"

Madoka kisses the top of her head. "I know you weren't, Homura-chan."

Homura settles back into her spot in Madoka's lap. "I'd gladly trade places with you, Madoka."

Madoka smiles. "I know you would, Homura-chan. But," she gently taps her on the nose, before fixing her glasses, "something tells me that if I gave you too much power, you'd do something stupid with it."

Homura huffs. "Don't confuse me with Miki Sayaka."

Madoka leans in close, until Homura can feel her breath against her face. "...You know that's impossible, Homura-chan," she whispers, her voice low.

Homura lifts her head, closing the small gap in between to kiss her.

She pulls away. "Madoka?"

"Hmm?"

"I never gave you your birthday present."

"You didn't."

"...You peeked, didn't you?"

Madoka smiles innocently. "...No?"

Homura sighs. "Well, it's not like I really hid it. But... later today, will you come with me to the garden?"

Madoka lifts her hand, placing it on the side of Homura's face. "Sure, Homura-chan. I'll go wherever you want me to. And no, it still doesn't excuse you from tomorrow's festival."

Homura becomes limp against her body, and Madoka barely manages to catch her before she falls.

"Homura-chan!"

"I can't move, Madoka. You'll have to carry me."

Madoka laughs, easily pulling Homura against her. "I don't mind."

"You're not supposed to agree," Homura whines.

She grins. "I know."

\\

Hand in hand, Homura leads her through their private garden. Heels tap against wood as they cross the familiar bridge, stopping briefly to watch as cherry blossoms flutter down.

A few lands on Madoka's head, and Homura gently brushes them away.

They share a smile, before they continue.

Green in Spring, and past the cobblestone path. Her eyes flicker towards the familiar trail, already knowing her piano no longer sits at the end; it's in the banquet hall, moved, in preparation for their wedding.

Madoka squeezes her hand, and Homura glances at her with a smile as they glide on by.

Summer, and the sun bears down against their backs. She loosens her scarf as Madoka fans herself against the heat.

Past the familiar gazebo; beyond the wildflowers. She stops in front of the large patch of dirt, no longer empty, and still overgrown with prickly brambles.

"Another half year," Madoka murmurs as she stares.

She squeezes Madoka's hand this time, and Madoka responds with a smile, before she's the one leading them away.

Further, and they enter Fall with blankets of red that reminds her of outside.

She watches as leaves drift through the air; watching as they fall, as they disappear.

A familiar feeling, but, she lifts Madoka's hand, kissing it softly.

Things aren't the same.

They continue, the crunch signaling their footsteps as they walk past the line of trees.

The temperature drops, and she shares her scarf with Madoka, wrapping it around her neck when she sees the first sign of a shiver.

Winter, white, and mist exhaled with every breath.

A different, crisp sound as they step; a different kind of wonderland.

She holds Madoka's hands in hers, occasionally blowing on them, keeping them warm.

Madoka smiles fondly, the sight reminding her just how much she's loved.

The path behind them disappears as flurries continue to fall, but Homura ignores it, already knowing the way by heart.

They continue to walk, until they're both shivering, pressing close to stay warm.

"H-Homura-chan...?"

"Almost there," she murmurs, her hands rubbing Madoka's arms to keep the goosebumps down. "I told you you should've dressed warmer."

Madoka pouts as Homura smiles.

She spots the red ribbon tied around one of the branches, and increases her pace, pulling Madoka along with her.

"We're here," she whispers.

They duck under a low hanging branch, and golden eyes flicker to the familiar red as they pass.

"Madoka."

She turns back, and her eyes widen at the sight before them.

A small clearing, lined with strings of origami tied all around. Pink, and purple; blue, and red, and yellow.

She smiles as the cold vanishes.

Homura takes her hand, gentle, as they continue inside.

She looks around, realizing that it's more than just folded flowers; there's animals too, and she grins when she realizes Homura has arranged them by habitat.

She turns, seeking lavender in the sea of the colours.

Homura smiles at her, and they stop in front of one of the larger trees.

"Homura-chan... Thank you."

Homura steps closer to slip her arms around Madoka's waist. "Madoka. Look up."

She does as told, her smile widening when she spots the bundle of cranes hanging from one of the taller branches. Long enough and filled with enough cranes that if she reached out, she could touch them.

Already knowing there's 1000 of them up above without having to count.

Homura hugs her close. "Happy Birthday, Madoka. Make a wish."

Madoka knows—can appreciate the humor in Homura's statement. She laughs softly, her tears finally falling as she tries to find the words.

"Homura-chan..."

"Hmm?"

She presses her hands against Homura's back, holding her tightly.

Homura continues to hold her as she cries, rubbing her back, whispering reassures into her ear.

Finally, she pulls away with a small sniffle. "I wish," she wipes at her eyes, wanting to see Homura clearly, "I wish to be with you forever, Homura-chan. That we'll be happy, together, as Akemi Homura, and Akemi Madoka."

Homura hums softly. She gently pushes Madoka back, only to place her hands on her shoulders.

With a smile, she leans forward, eyes closing as she brushes her lips against Madoka's.

When her eyes open, she's crying just as hard as Madoka is.

"Done," she whispers.

Madoka grins, before she tackles her, and they both fall onto the snowy floor.

Madoka straddles her, smiling at Homura's crooked glasses, and knows her own face is just as flushed, just as red.

"Homura-chan... I'm cold."

Homura reaches out, snow covered fingers gently brushing Madoka's face. "You are?"

Madoka nods, leaning close. "Uh huh..."

"Maybe I should warm you up then...?"

"Will you?" Madoka asks as she tugs Homura's glasses off.

"I'll try...?"

Madoka smiles, her lips barely touching Homura's. "Okay... try your best, Homura-chan..."

"O-Oka**y..."**

AN: ... Or should I say Akemi Madoka :)))) I was originally not going to write anything for Madoka's birthday, but I had a stray thought. This fic is seriously like, super MadoHomu. The super-est MadoHomu, ever. I don't know, I don't even like romance that much, but apparently I'm a romantic at heart.

Snow falls, a light, white dust, drifting down to cover the streets down below.

She stares high up, gaze unfocused, watching as snowflakes flutter by. Each inhale chills her lungs, flowing and continuing all the way down to her bones.

And still—

The cold is forgotten, just like the feather light touches of melted snow on her skin.

Another breath—followed by a blink of her eyes as something pulls her back.

It's a small tug felt around her heart, and she merely readjusts the weight on her legs as she waits.

She hears the soft crunch; the hurried rustles of fabric.

The sudden cry of surprise.

She turns, arms held out to catch the pink blur that face plants into her chest.

The figure against her is light; familiar, yet not.

Madoka lifts her head, showing off her cheeks that are flushed as bright as her hair. She grips Homura's arms tightly as Homura gently rests her hands on her waist.

"S-Sorry, Homura-chan," Madoka breathes out, still blushing heavily.

She shakes her head, and offers her a smile as they both straighten up.

Madoka makes a show of readjusting her clothes: fingers first pulling her scarf, and then moving to tug her jacket. She realizes her hands are empty, and looks around, but Homura is already kneeling, and reaching for the bag that had been thrown when she had tripped.

"Ah, thank you, Homura-chan..." Madoka murmurs as she watches Homura stand.

Homura dusts the snow off her bag, and once clean, she loops the straps over her arm, letting the bag join her own. "It's fine. I'm glad I was here to catch you. You should be more careful, the streets are slippery."

Madoka tucks her neck in, eyes averted as she turns shy at Homura's words; at that soft expression. She glances back up, only to find Homura still watching her. It's then that she notices Homura's own cheeks are tinged pink. Notices the stray drops staining her glasses. She reaches out, fingers gentle as they brush away fresh snowflakes from Homura's face.

"I'm sorry," Madoka says softly. "You must've been cold waiting for me." Her hands unwrap the scarf around her neck, only to wind the cloth around Homura's neck. She bundles the ends of the scarf securely, and smiles once she's done.

Homura blinks. Her eyes flicker down to regard her new accessory. "I'm—"

Madoka still grips the scarf in her hands. "It's okay, Homura-chan. Take it, please. We'll get you a scarf soon," she murmurs almost absently.

There's warmth around her neck; a light weight resting against her shoulders.

A piercing gaze locked into her eyes.

If she leans forward, just a little, she knows Madoka will follow, meeting her halfway.

But—

She blinks again, this time deliberately breaking eye-contact. Madoka sucks in a breath and immediately drops her hands. She takes a step back.

"Ah, uhm, we—should... get going, Homura-chan," Madoka says as she readjusts her jacket collar.

She nods, pressing down that familiar disappointment. "Yes, we... should, Madoka."

Madoka clears her throat, and joins Homura's side as they start walking home.

Two steps forward, before Madoka takes Homura's hand into her own. She's blushing, keeping her eyes forward, and Homura merely tucks their hands into her jacket pocket.

Madoka gives her a shy smile that she returns.

As they walk, Homura gently runs her thumb over Madoka's fingers. Thin.

Small.

/

They tap their shoes to loosen snow stuck to their soles, before they enter the house. They shed their jackets, hanging them on the coat rack placed in front, and after they slip their shoes in their respective places, they continue further inside.

"Ahhh, it's so cold," Madoka shivers from the loss of her jacket and pulls Homura closer for warmth.

Homura touches the scarf that Madoka had insisted she kept wearing. "I told you, that I was fine."

Madoka ignores her, tugging her along. "I'll be fine once we warm up in the kotatsu. Papa! I'm home!"

"Marokaaaa. Homu-nee."

Madoka smiles at Takkun who waves at her from his high chair. "I'm back, Takkun!"

"Welcome backkkk."

"Welcome back you two," Tomohisa calls out from the kitchen.

Homura mumbles a soft reply under her breath.

Madoka bumps her leg. "Homura-chan."

She ducks her head. "I'm... back," she murmurs a little louder.

Eyes cast to the floor, she misses the shared smile between Tomohisa and Madoka.

"Did you two want something hot to drink?"

Madoka continues to drag Homura into the living room, to where the kotatsu is set up in the middle.

"Hot cocoa please, Papa!"

"One hot cocoa, coming right up. Homura-chan?"

Homura opens her mouth to refuse his offer, but Madoka interrupts by pulling her down to sit in front of the kotatsu.

"Homura-chan will have tea, Papa," Madoka answers for her.

Homura shoots her a curious glance, but Madoka merely gives her a beaming smile.

"One tea for Homura-chan, coming right up."

"Thank you, Papa!"

Homura sets their bags aside, before she settles into her seat with her legs tucked underneath her. Madoka pulls the blanket over, making sure it covers both their legs.

"...Thank you," Homura says softly.

"This is nice, isn't it, Homura-chan?"

She looks around, evaluating this familiar, yet unfamiliar setting from so long ago. "...Yes."

Madoka sighs, resting her head against Homura's shoulder. She closes her eyes. "Really, really nice."

\\

Dinner, and like always, like how she remembers, Junko's presence takes command over the room.

A hearty laugh; a teasing smile.

Chopsticks lightly resting in one hand, bowl of rice in the other, like always, she stares, watching as Junko animatedly recounts her day. Tomohisa nods and replies at the right times, and Takkun listens with one ear, while his hands send his food to everywhere but to his mouth.

Madoka is the one who laughs the loudest; smiles the brightest.

Madoka, who so obviously takes after her parents.

Madoka—

She pushes down her thoughts, and finally takes a bite of her rice.

"...Homura-chan?"

She blinks, and turns her head, only to find Madoka looking at her. She politely swallows her food before replying. "I'm... sorry, did you say something?"

"Ah." Madoka smiles. "Did you want more soup?" She's eying the half-filled bowl that has long since cooled down.

She's not even sure what the food tastes like. "It's... alright," she murmurs, moving to switch out her rice bowl with the soup.

Madoka is faster, and the bowl of soup is now in her hands. "Papa, can I have some more soup?"

"Sure, Madoka."

When she's handed back the bowl, wisps of steam can be seen rising to the top.

"Homura-chan, be sure to drink it before it gets cold," Madoka tells her gently.

She lowers her eyes. "Yes... thank you."

A touch on her wrist draws her eyes back up. Madoka gives her another smile, before she pulls her hand away.

She takes a sip of her soup, using it to swallow that painful lump in her throat.

It doesn't work, of course.

/

She leans back in her chair, listening to the creak as plastic and metal move to accommodate her.

A glance around to the bare walls, to the plainly furnished room. Her eyes flicker to the cat bed placed in the corner; empty, because Amy is a fickle cat that wanders off whenever she pleases.

She turns her attention to her desk, covered with scattered papers and an opened laptop for her school work. She gazes past that, to the two picture frames sitting by the edge.

Just as she reaches out to grab one, there's a light rap against the door. She breathes out slowly, before glancing to the side, to the door.

"Homura-chan?"

The lights in her room are on, and she knows it can be seen through the cracks between the door.

But if she says nothing, if she remains quiet, she also knows that Madoka will leave and return to her own room.

"...Come in."

There's a pause, before the door knob twists, and the door is pushed open to reveal an apprehensive Madoka, dressed in her pajamas as she grips a pillow in her hands.

"I'm... not bothering you, am I?" Madoka asks softly, hugging the pillow against her chest.

She rises from the seat, one hand gently brushing her hair back. "Not at all. Did you... need something?"

"Ah..." Madoka shyly glances to the floor. "I was... just, wondering... if..."

The sight of a bashful Madoka makes something in her chest tighten almost painfully. She readjusts her glasses as she tries to calm her thoughts.

"I... don't mind," she murmurs as she turns to face the bed.

Madoka smiles to herself, hugging the pillow tighter. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

\\

She waits until Madoka is asleep, before she gently extracts herself from her arms, and quietly slips out of bed.

Barefoot, and slightly shivering, she exits the room, and continues down the hallway to the front door.

Sometimes, Amy is there, waiting for her and expecting to be carried along.

Today, she is alone as the door opens, granting her access outside.

The cold hits her head on, but it's a quick transition to clothes that she never thought she would once again be wearing, and a thin barrier of magic cast to surround her body.

The door is locked behind her as she continues down the roads.

Early morning, as the city sleeps.

Light taps of her heels follow her, the sounds muffled against soft powder. She pauses to look over her shoulder, watching as her footprints slowly disappear, covered by new snow that falls.

Unhurried, she continues on her way as traces of her presence are endlessly erased behind her.

The streets are quiet and empty, almost like a—

She exhales lightly, letting her eyes close ever so briefly.

Her eyes open, but before she can take another step forward, there's that tug pulling against her chest.

Like always, she hesitates.

Her wanderings lead her through the city, and like always, she finds herself close to the border of Mitakihara and Kazamino. How many more steps until she reaches the city limits?

But like always, she can never ignore that feeling; can never bring herself to move forward.

She turns around to start the long trek back.

/

Barefoot, and once again in her pajamas, she re-enters the house.

The door is locked with a light click.

She turns, and stares.

Madoka sits by the entrance, wrapped in a blanket, leaning against the wall. Eyes closed, hair a mess of pink tangles.

She steps forward, and as her foot pads across the floor, Madoka opens her eyes.

"...Homura-chan? Where did you go...?"

She brushes her hair back. "I... couldn't sleep."

"Mm..." Madoka blinks sleepily, and Homura moves closer to help her up. "Your hands are cold, Homura-chan," Madoka whispers as she leans against her.

"Ah..."

Madoka readjusts the blankets, draping them over Homura's shoulders. "You were gone for a while."

She can hear the disapproval in her voice. "...I lost track of time."

Madoka presses her face against her neck. "Next time, I'll come with you."

Homura slips one arm around Madoka's waist, and starts leading her back to her room. "Let's go to bed."

She feels Madoka inhale deeply; feels that small hand press her closer. "...Alright."

/

The bed is cold when they climb in. Homura settles into her spot, and Madoka molds her body against her.

"Homura-chan...?"

She resists the urge to shiver as Madoka's breath hits her neck. "Hm...?"

"Where—were you going...?"

She closes her eyes, turning to slip her arms around Madoka's waist. "Nowhere," she whispers softly.

"Really...?"

"Mmhmm..."

"Really, really?"

"Yes. Really, really."

Madoka shifts to rest her head against her shoulder. "Okay... Good..."

She hugs Madoka closer. "Goodnight, Madoka."

"Goodnight, Homura-chan... I love you..."

She hesitates ever so slightly. "...I love you, too."

\\

She's readjusting the cuff of her jacket, when she notices the familiar glint of metal on her left hand.

She is used to—remembers—when she closes her eyes, a silver band is around her middle finger, carved with letters made in a foreign language.

It's been, how long now though, that the ring—should be—is now—a platinum gold; an important promise, bundled and tied and wrapped around her ring finger.

She exhales slowly.

Maybe—

/

The day begins, with Madoka clinging to her—like always.

She wakes first, right before the alarm sounds. She shuts it off, and remains in bed as Madoka continues to sleep.

Her breathing is slow and steady.

Gently, she runs her fingers through Madoka's messy hair, helping her clear the tangles gained from her sleep.

Minutes pass, and she can feel Madoka stirring.

"Mm...?"

Rose pink opens, and even after—all this time—the sight has her own heart skipping a beat.

Madoka tilts her face, and offers her a sleepy smile. "Morning, Homura-chan."

She drags her fingers through Madoka's hair one last time. "Good morning, Madoka." She pulls her hands away.

Madoka pouts. She closes her eyes, her hands now resting on Homura's waist.

But time is clicking, and Homura reluctantly starts sitting up. "We should get up, Madoka. You need to wake your mother."

Madoka groans, and buries her face into Homura's neck. "It's so cold though..."

"Only for a little bit."

Madoka's legs wrap around hers, entangling them, and preventing her from escaping.

"Madoka..."

"Just... a little longer, okay, Homura-chan?"

She finds she cannot refuse. "...Okay."

\\

When Junko wakes with a bit of coaxing from Madoka, all three head to the bathroom to begin their daily routine.

As Madoka starts placing the toothpaste to her toothbrush, she freezes, and stares.

Waiting her turn, Homura looks at her, noticing that she's no longer moving. "Madoka? Is something wrong?"

Madoka's brow furrows, and suddenly she's turning her hand over and over again.

"Madoka?" Junko tilts her head at her curiously. "What's wrong?"

Eyes wide, Madoka continues turning her hand. "Something..." Her eyes flicker to the side, head now moving as she searches for something.

"Madoka?" Junko grabs her by the shoulders, and forces her to look at her. "What's wrong?"

"S-Something's... I'm... I-It's not—here, Mama," Madoka tells her as tears start gathering in her eyes.

Homura glances over, remaining quiet.

"Don't worry. Whatever it is, we'll find it, okay?" Junko smiles, and Madoka nods, unsure.

"O...kay."

"Brush your teeth first. And then wash your face. Wake up a bit. Maybe you'll remember better."

"O...kay."

Done with the toothpaste, Madoka hands the tube over to Homura.

"Thank you," Homura murmurs, avoiding her eyes.

But Madoka is distracted enough that she doesn't notice.

/

Fresh faces, and now dressed for school, as per Junko's suggestion, Madoka searches her room for whatever she has lost.

The problem is though, that Madoka cannot exactly remember what it is.

Junko doesn't notice anything missing, and asking Homura merely draws a shake of her head.

At first, the papers on her desk are calmly rifled through; restacked and stacked over and over as she continues to search.

Finally, Madoka decides her desk doesn't have whatever it is, and she starts searching the rest of her room.

Her calm is slowly agitated into irritation, and after throwing everything out of her dresser, she whirls on Homura, who is standing by the door.

"Why—aren't you helping me, Homura-chan?"

Homura presses her fingers against her leg. "You… told me to stay out of the way."

Madoka frowns, but she stands suddenly, and starts walking over to her, completely ignoring the pile of clothes left in her wake.

"Maybe it's in your room, Homura-chan. Maybe—maybe it—fell off, while we were sleeping."

As Madoka squeezes past, she reaches out with a strong hand, and grabs Homura's wrist, pulling her along.

/

Irritation eventually morphs into desperation.

Eyes angry, Madoka grips Homura's arms tightly, pinning her to the wall.

"Homura-chan."

Rose pink—with a small glimpse of golden yellow peeking through.

"Where is it?"

Her voice is lower, deeper.

"I—" She struggles to pull away, but Madoka refuses to let go.

"*Homura-chan*."

"I-It's—under the bed."

Madoka immediately releases her, footsteps hurried as she moves to check.

Hands free, Homura brings them close with a small clap.

/

The day begins, with Madoka clinging to her—like always.

She wakes first, right before the alarm sounds. She shuts it off, and remains in bed as Madoka continues to sleep.

Her breathing is slow and steady.

She brings her hand up, her eyes gazing at the gold band that stands out against her pale skin.

She exhales softly, before resting her arm across her eyes.

Madoka—shouldn't—

And yet—

\\

"Yo, Madoka, Homura!"

Sayaka waves to them, and waits as they move to join her.

"Morning, Sayaka-chan."

"Miki Sayaka."

Sayaka sighs loudly. In three steps, she is next to Homura, and close enough to throw her arm around her shoulder. "Seriously, Homura. I've known you for how long now? And you're still calling me that?"

Homura merely readjusts her glasses back into place.

"Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka sighs, but releases her with a small push. "One day, Homura."

Madoka tugs Homura back to her side, before giving a curious look around. "Kyouko-chan isn't here yet?"

"Ahhh," Sayaka places her arms behind her head, "she said something about being a bit late today."

Madoka nods.

"But, anyways," Sayaka turns to them with a grin, "you're so lucky to be going to a ski resort during winter vacation." She reaches over to nudge Homura with her elbow. "Pretty romantic, if you ask me."

There's an obvious side glance to Madoka, who responds by blushing as she turns her face away.

They both miss as Homura's grip tightens around her bag.

"So lucky," Sayaka says as she tilts her head up. "I don't think my parents have any plans at all. Poor Sayaka-chan is going to be stuck at home while her friends get to experience a real ski resort and have so much fun." She gives a dramatic sigh.

"Ah. Uhm," Madoka bites her lip, and after giving Homura a glance, "I could ask Mama if you could come with us...?"

Sayaka lowers her head, deliberately keeping her face hidden. "Oh, but I couldn't—I shouldn't intrude on your family time. I mean, just because I've known you for half our lives, Madoka, it would be weird and awkward for me to join in on this trip..."

Homura resists the urge to roll her eyes.

Madoka, however, drops Homura's hand to take Sayaka's. "Sayaka-chan! Don't say that! I'll ask Mama tonight if you can come along. I'm sure she won't mind; you're always welcomed!"

Sayaka turns to her, eyes shining. "Really? But I—"

"Really!"

Sayaka clasps Madoka's hands tightly. "Thank you, Madoka! And don't worry about the money—my parents already agreed to pay my expenses."

Madoka blinks. "E-Eh?"

Sayaka pats Madoka's hand, before letting go. She shoots Homura a grin, who responds by brushing her hair back.

"Yo! Sorry for being late!"

They turn to see Kyouko jogging towards them with a wide grin on her face. She stops in front of them, and takes a moment to catch her breath.

Sayaka gently pokes her shoulder. "How'd it go, Kyouko?"

Kyouko gives her two thumbs up. "I have to help with service, like usual, and pull some extra hours for clean up and stuff, but my dad said okay!"

Madoka blinks. She turns to Homura who lifts one shoulder, mirroring her confusion. Madoka absently takes Homura's hand, before turning back to Sayaka and Kyouko.

"Uhm, Sayaka-chan? Kyouko-chan? What... are you talking about?"

Kyouko grins and reaches out to punch Madoka lightly on the shoulder. "The ski resort, of course!"

"What...?"

Sayaka slips her arm around Madoka's shoulder, and starts pulling her along. "I mean, one more person isn't going to be that much of a problem, is it, Madoka?"

"One more person...?"

"Or, uh," Sayaka scratches her cheek sheepishly, "maybe two...?"

Madoka immediately stops walking. "Wait. What—are you talking about, Sayaka-chan?"

"Ahhh, I told you we should've just asked her earlier," Kyouko says from behind them.

Madoka turns to Kyouko. "Uhm, ask what...?"

Sayaka gives her a nervous smile. "Uh, so, I mean, it's... the last year here for Mami-san."

Madoka nods sadly. "I know..."

"So, we were thinking we should... do something together, for winter break, since her parents are going to be busy..."

"That... sounds fine...?" Madoka says as she tilts her head.

"Just—" Sayaka coughs into her hand. "...my parents aren't too keen on me going somewhere without adult supervision..."

"Okay..."

"And—uh, Mami-san, actually loves—skiing. And, since, your family is already heading to a ski resort..." She gives Madoka a look.

Madoka sighs softly. "Sayaka-chan..."

Sayaka claps her hands together and bows her head. "Please, Madoka! Otherwise the three of us are going to be staying at home, dreaming of having the same amount of fun you and Homura will be having!"

She reaches over to pull Kyouko next to her.

"You lower your head too!"

"Uh, I'm kind of alright with staying home though—"

Sayaka elbows Kyouko in the stomach, and she lowers her head as she winces in pain.

Madoka sighs again, before she tugs Homura close. "I'll... ask Mama today. But—" she points a finger at Sayaka and Kyouko, "there's no guarantee that she's going to agree, okay?"

Sayaka steps forward engulfing both Madoka and Homura in a hug. "Thank you, Madoka!" She turns, and lands a kiss on Madoka's head. "Thank you so much!" She turns to Homura, who is trying to slip out of her grasp. "Thank you, Homura!"

"I didn't—" Homura slams her foot down on Sayaka's when she sees how close she is.

"Ow!"

Frowning, Homura steps back as her hand moves to fix her hair.

"Ouch," Sayaka glares. "What was that for?!"

Madoka sighs, and moves over to help Homura. "Sayaka-chan, you know how shy Homura-chan is. Stop teasing her. Plus..." she glances to where Kyouko is now scowling, "...you're making Kyouko-chan jealous."

Like usual, Sayaka and Kyouko both sputter at her words. She ignores them, instead running her hands through Homura's hair to fix the non-existent tangles.

Red faced, Sayaka turns to Kyouko who is avoiding her eyes. "Stop—blushing! You're making it seem like she's telling the truth!"

"That's—you—shut up!"

Madoka straightens out Homura's glasses and gives her smile.

"NO! YOU!"

"...We should... head to class, Madoka. We're going to miss the first bell," Homura murmurs as Madoka once again takes her hand.

"Okay, Homura-chan."

Before they can even take one step, Sayaka and Kyouko are suddenly barreling away.

"Come back here, Kyouko!"

"Make me!"

Madoka and Homura both watch as they almost side swipe other students along the way.

"Ah." Madoka shakes her head. "They... should just admit their feelings." She glances to Homura with a shy smile.

"Perhaps they're... holding back, because of Tomoe Mami."

Madoka hums. "Sayaka-chan... should really make up her mind."

Homura remains quiet, knowing that even back there, Sayaka couldn't.

Madoka's fingers pressing into her hand has her glancing over.

She's given another smile, and it takes all of her willpower to not reach out and touch Madoka's face.

"I love you," Homura whispers softly.

Despite the crowded street as they head to school, Madoka brings Homura's hand close to her cheek.

"I love you too, Homura-chan."

\\

Even on a normal day, when skies are clear and temperatures are balmy, the rooftops are usually empty.

And today, when everything outside is lightly dusted with snow, they are the only ones there willing to brave the cold.

Madoka sits close, pressed to her side. She wraps one arm around Madoka's shoulders in an attempt to keep her warm. It earns her a shy smile that sends a stab of pain through her heart.

She ignores it, closing her eyes to rest her head against Madoka's.

There's a gentle touch as fingers lightly brush back her bangs. "Homura-chan? Are you okay?"

She nods, eyes opening to find Madoka peering at her in worry. "I'm fine." She smiles, and Madoka watches her for a few seconds. "We should eat our lunch," she murmurs as she turns her attention to the bentou in her lap.

Madoka gives her an unsure look. She pretends not to notice as she removes the lid to the container.

"Madoka?"

Her expression remains worried. Another silent stare, before Madoka reluctantly moves to start on her own lunch.

She works through her food quietly, and eventually Madoka turns to chat with the others to discuss their winter break plans.

No matter how many times she has been here, or maybe because she has been here so many times, sitting on the roof and eating lunch makes her so incredibly nostalgic. The food on her tongue is tasteless; her mouth, dry.

There's Madoka's distinct laugh heard in her ears, and she turns her head to stare over the metal fences that surround the rooftop.

This high, and she's expecting hills covered in snow.

A building in the distance; a place she was close to calling home.

She blinks as a snowflake lands on her glasses, breaking her thoughts. She tilts her head up, watching as light snow flutters down.

"Ahh… it's snowing again," Madoka says softly as she quickly moves to place the lid back onto her bentou. "We should head back inside before it starts snowing harder."

She knows that won't happen—knows the snow piles up only to a certain height, before it all disappears.

She nods, and packs up her own bentou.

/

Classes end, and they meet briefly at the gates after school.

Kyouko is the first to leave, needing to go back home in order to help with her promised chores to pay for her potential trip.

Mami has an appointment with her own parents; an early Christmas dinner because they will be busy next week.

It leaves Sayaka, Madoka and Homura to mull about the entrance for a little longer, and they wave to Hitomi and Kyousuke as they pass by.

"Sayaka." Kyousuke turns to her with a gentle smile. "You are coming to the show, right?"

Sayaka gives him a thumbs up as she winks. "Yup! Wouldn't miss it for anything! Front row seats to the long awaited duet by Kamijou Kyousuke and," she turns to Hitomi, "Shizuki Hitomi? It's not everyday I can brag to everyone that I know celebrities in real life!"

Hitomi tucks strands of hair behind her ear. "You flatter us, Sayaka-san. I can't speak for Kamijou-kun, but I for one don't think I deserve the title of 'celebrity.'"

Sayaka grins and steps forward to elbow Kyousuke in the stomach. "Come on, Hitomi! Why are you being so bashful for? Everyone knows that Kyousuke's the one that can't hold a candle to you." She nudges Kyousuke.

He gives her a confused look as he rubs his stomach. "What...?"

"Right, Kyousuke?" she tells him through gritted teeth. She nods her head to Hitomi, causing him to glance over. "Hitomi's way better than you, isn't she?"

He frowns. "The piano and violin are completely different instruments, Sayaka. I thought you knew this."

Still smiling, she moves to step on his foot.

"Ow—"

"Sayaka-san—"

"Seriously," Sayaka says with a sigh, "Kyousuke's just so hopeless sometimes..." She shoots Kyousuke another glare.

"What are—"

Homura raises an eyebrow at Madoka, who gives her an amused smile, before she steps forward.

"I'm sure your show will turn out amazing, Hitomi-chan, Kamijou-kun!"

All three turn to face her.

"I'm really sorry that me and Homura-chan won't be able to make it."

"Ah," Hitomi shakes her head, "it is understandable, Madoka-san. It is during the holiday season, and there are bound to be conflicting schedules." She smiles politely, "my parents are also busy, and won't be attending as well."

It doesn't make Madoka feel better. "I'll go to your next show!" She glances to Kyousuke. "Both yours and Kamijou-kun's!"

Hitomi blinks at Madoka's fervor. "It... there's no guarantee that they will ask us to perform again." Her eyes flicker to the ground, and there's a small hint of nervousness on her face.

Sayaka nudges Kyousuke, who for once understands.

He clears his throat. "I'm... sure that we will do fine, Shizu—" he hisses as Sayaka's heel digs into his foot.

"Hitomi," she whispers loudly into his ear.

His face flushes, but when Sayaka lifts her leg, he cringes, before nodding quickly.

"Uh," he coughs into his hand, "we will be fine, Hi...tomi." He turns his head away. "We're practicing everyday, and there's no doubt that you'll perform anything less than perfect."

Hitomi blushes at his words. "Kamijou-kun..."

Sayaka whistles, and it's enough to snap Kyousuke out of his embarrassment.

"Uh," he quickly reaches over to grab Hitomi's arm, "we have, uhm, practice to get to, so—" he cuts himself off as he starts dragging Hitomi away. "See you girls later."

"'Practice' huh, Kyousuke?" Sayaka jeers to his back.

"Have a nice day, Madoka-san, Sayaka-san, Akemi-san," Hitomi says as she's pulled along.

Sayaka shakes her head. "That Kyousuke, if it was up to him, he'd never make a move on Hitomi."

Homura rolls her eyes.

Madoka bumps her leg. "Play nice, Homura-chan," she whispers softly.

"Anyways," Sayaka turns to them, "you two mind coming with me to the convenience store before you head home?"

Madoka shakes her head, and follows Sayaka as she starts moving. "Not at all, Sayaka-chan. What are you getting?"

She places her hands behind her head. "I feel like meat buns all of a sudden."

Homura leans forward. "Let me guess, you're going to buy some to drop off to a certain someone."

Sayaka trips over her own feet. "Uhhh, what—are you talking about?"

Madoka nudges Homura. "Homura-chan." She glances to Sayaka. "It's nice of you to buy some for Kyouko-chan though, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka sputters. "W-What?! Why would I buy meat buns for her? I just—felt like eating something hot! That's it!"

Homura remains quiet as she tugs Madoka forward.

"Really!" Sayaka yells as she follows them. "I had some the other day—and they were really, really good. I'll buy you two one, and you can see why I wanted to buy some!"

Madoka smiles at Sayaka, but Homura flicks her hair behind her.

"And, who exactly did you go with to buy these meat buns?" she asks as a small smirk sits on her lips.

Sayaka glares. "You know, you used to be so much cuter back then; what happened?"

Homura raises an eyebrow at the sudden change of topic.

Madoka grips Homura's arm tighter. "Homura-chan is still cute, Sayaka-chan."

Sayaka grins. "Guess you would know, Madoka."

Face flushed, Madoka tries to hide behind Homura's shoulder. "What—do you mean by that, Sayaka-chan?"

"Oh, I don't know," Sayaka says as she now walks ahead, "just, Homura used to cling to you all the time." She gives them a side glance. "Seems like that hasn't changed. Or..." she taps her chin with a finger, "maybe it's the other way around."

Madoka hugs Homura's arm. "I... can't help it," she murmurs softly. "If... If I let go, it... feels like Homura-chan will leave..."

Sayaka immediately drops her hands and rushes to her side, "H-Hey! Why are you crying?"

She looks at Homura who shakes her head.

"Hey—Homura's—not going anywhere. She's right here."

Madoka nods as Homura slips an arm around her shoulder.

"I—know," Madoka says softly. She closes her eyes as tears trickle down. "I know."

\\

The city remains quiet at night; enough silence, that the words whispering in her mind ring as loudly as possible.

Doubt and self-hatred; selfishness; loneliness that she tries her best to push away.

Alone, and once more she wanders the city.

But today, she's not alone.

There's movement out of the corner of her eye.

She turns, and despite the magic that keeps her warm, a chill runs down as familiar red eyes stare back.

Her lip curls into a snarl, and her hand moves to her buckler.

The cold metal gripped in her fingers calms her nerves ever so slightly.

/We meet, once again. Who are you?/

She shivers, hating that echo that rattles around in her mind.

"How did you get in?"

/What do you plan to accomplish by keeping her here?/

"What do you plan to accomplish by coming back here?" she asks instead.

/I have explained our motivations; we wish to reverse the entropy of the universe. For that reason, we need to harness the power of the Law of Cycles. Why do you continue to sabotage our mission?/

She points the gun at him. "How did you get in?"

/You… are human, are you not? You understand then, that if entropy is not countered, the universe will end./

"You are not welcomed here. I have told you this plenty of times."

/What is your connection to the Law of Cycles? I sense magic in you, but I do not recognize you; who did you contract with?/

She tilts her head. "Who knows. But," she moves her finger to the trigger, "I believe we have talked enough for today."

/You—/

His voice cuts off as she freezes time to empty her clip.

Time resumes, and Kyubey falls limp to the ground, his red and white body half blending into the snow.

She claps her hands, and he disappears.

The gun is slipped back into her buckler, but she remains standing, staring at the spot that he had occupied, just a moment ago.

The tremors start from her chest, blossoming and slowly working its way to her hands, spreading all the way down to her toes.

She presses her fingers into her legs, willing for the feelings to past.

She doesn't know how long she stands there, teeth grit, head bowed.

Something pulls her back, and blindly, she stumbles through the streets, following that lifeline that calls to her.

Even though half her vision blurs with fresh tears and the wind in her mind howls, she still remembers to dispel her magic. She shivers when she returns to her pajamas and steps inside.

Madoka is there once more, sitting by the entrance. This time she all but collapses against her.

Madoka gathers her in her arms, hugging her close and wrapping the blankets around her.

She sobs into her neck, her tears spilling, falling, seeking bare skin.

"Shhh," Madoka whispers into her ear. "It's okay, Homura-chan. You're okay."

She hiccups, hands gripping, clinging to Madoka as tightly as possible.

Hands stroke her head. "Shhh. You're okay."

/

She can hear her heartbeat—a constant, steady thump.

Her eyes are tired, and there's a light haze surrounding her mind.

Sleep though, is elusive. For her, and for Madoka.

She shifts, readjusting her position, entangling her legs around Madoka's.

"Homura-chan...?"

She moves her head. "Hm...?"

Hands press into her back. "I told you... not to be by yourself, didn't I?"

She buries her face into Madoka's shoulder.

Madoka falls back into silence, her hands moving to rub gentle circles up and down Homura's spine.

Her eyes feel heavy, and right before she falls asleep, she feels slight pressure on the top of her head.

"Goodnight, Homura-chan... I love you."

"I'm—sorry..." she mumbles as her consciousness fades away.

\\

Maybe the most frustrating thing about living in a dream that's based on reality, is that when she wakes, she never remembers—doesn't know exactly what it is she is waking to.

An unfamiliar ceiling overhead; arms tightly wrapped around her; an empty bed; white marbled floor, cushions underneath her as she had fallen asleep by the table; a familiar ceiling above.

Does the threat of Walpurgisnacht loom over these precious days? Is the clicking of the clock the painful countdown until everything resets—and she has to say goodbye again?

The familiar pathway to school; the rooftop that makes scenes play over and over in her mind.

Does insanity still lurk inside them? Will a simple truth push Mami over the edge?

Every time Sayaka nudges and tries to encourage Kyousuke towards Hitomi, is she hiding her tears behind her smile?

The one, maybe, the most changed is Kyouko, who smiles and laughs almost in a carefree way; that sharpness inside her seems to have been dulled down to a blunt edge.

Madoka though—is the one she watches the most.

Madoka, who's clumsy and sometimes trips because she's not paying attention.

Madoka, who gives her shy smiles. Who blushes, and stammers and—

Golden yellow is replaced by rose pink, and she knows—she should be happy—because, this is what she has wanted all along.

And yet—

/

The last day before winter break begins, and even the teachers seem more relaxed. Reminders are given that everyone should keep up with their studies, before the bell chimes one more time, signalling the end of classes.

She slowly packs all her belongings into her bag: textbooks, her laptop.

Soft footsteps, and she looks up to see Madoka by her desk, bag already in her hand as she grins.

"Let's go, Homura-chan! We're supposed to be meeting Mami-san outside."

Homura nods as she zips her bag closed. She stands as Madoka impatiently pulls her up. "Where are Miki Sayaka and Sakura Kyouko?"

Madoka blinks. "Eh? They—were just here."

"If you're looking for Sayaka-san," Hitomi cuts in as she approaches, "she went after Sakura-san. They—were yelling quite loudly; I'm surprised you didn't notice." Her eyes flicker to Homura, who tilts her head in her direction.

"Ah," Madoka blushes. "Uhm, do you have time to join us, Hitomi-chan?"

Hitomi shakes her head. "Unfortunately, I still have my lessons today, and then rehearsals for our recital." She tucks strands of hair behind her ear. "I know, you'll be busy during vacation, but," she briefly glances away, "perhaps we could spend some time together one of these days...?"

Madoka smiles. "Of course! Just tell me when you're free—maybe, sometime after we come back from our ski trip?"

Hitomi mirrors her smile, face looking relieved. "Yes, that sounds like a good plan. I will contact you later once my schedule is set." She bows. "I will take my leave here. Good day, Madoka-san," she nods to Homura, "Akemi-san."

"Bye, Hitomi-chan."

"Shizuki Hitomi."

Madoka turns to Homura. "Let's go get our jackets and meet everyone, Homura-chan."

She nods, and as she starts walking, Madoka automatically joins her side.

/

They meet Mami at the gates, and the smile she gives them seems a bit strained.

Sayaka and Kyouko flank her sides, both looking somehow subdued as they brush snow from their clothes.

"Kaname-san, Akemi-san." Mami steps forward. "We'll drop by the market first like we discussed." She's still smiling when she turns to Kyouko and Sayaka. "You two will behave yourself, are we clear?"

"Yes..." they agree weakly.

Mami nods in approval, before she faces Madoka and Homura once more. "Shall we?"

\\

Instead of the familiar path towards the high rise apartments, they head to one of the neighborhoods that is closer to where Madoka lives.

Instead of a two room apartment, they step into an unfamiliar house, where unfamiliar pictures hang on the walls, and unfamiliar decor is placed all around.

Most notable is the kotatsu set up in the living room, with no angular glass table in sight.

"Please make yourselves at home," Mami tells them as she neatly places her shoes to the side. "I'll put our perishables into the refrigerator, before preparing the snacks."

"Ah, let us help you, Mami-san." Madoka quickly fixes her shoes into a neat pile, before she glances to Homura. She nods, and they both follow Mami into the kitchen.

They work in tandem, quiet, save for the rustling of their bags and the sounds as they deposit food into the fridge.

"Akemi-san, can you retrieve a few plates please?"

She should know where they are by now, but she remains rooted in place because she still can't remember which cupboard holds what dishware.

There's a light touch on her back. She turns, and Madoka nods to the cupboard to their left.

She mouths a silent 'thank you,' and Madoka smiles, before she moves to help Mami with the tea.

Homura pulls open the cupboard, and as she reaches for the plates, she wonders if, maybe, Madoka really remembers more than it seemed.

The presence of Kyubey, however, are signs that the barrier is weakening.

How long then, until Madoka—

/

As they sit around the table, she feels herself starting to nod off. Her stomach is full, and she's nice and toasty as she leans against Madoka.

Just as she's falling asleep, she feels Madoka shift.

"I'll be right back, Homura-chan. Don't fall asleep."

Reluctantly, she forces her eyes open. She watches as Madoka follows Mami into the kitchen, though her eyes start to droop close before they enter.

She jumps, feeling her heart hammering when there's a heavy thump on her back.

"Madoka said not to sleep, Homura," Sayaka tells her, her voice grating on her nerves in her half-sleep daze.

Her groan is interrupted as she tries to stifle her yawn. She lifts her glasses to wipe her tears, and is in the process of slipping them back on when the lights turn off.

She tilts her head up, blinking at the sudden darkness.

Before she can move to pull out her phone, there's light from the kitchen, and a familiar voice singing as a cake is carried in her hands.

The others join in, four voices blending together as Madoka walks closer.

The apex of the song, followed by the end where Sayaka tries to harmonize, and her voice cracks ever so slightly during the last note.

Kyouko laughs loudly, though the elbow in her stomach turns her laughter into a breathy groan.

The flame from the candle sways and flickers, casting strange shadows to dance across Madoka's face.

"Happy Birthday, Homura-chan," Madoka tells her, smiling brightly. "Make a wish."

Those words has her breath hitching, and the room spins and spins because she can't seem to draw in a breath.

She vaguely realizes the lights are turned on, and it takes her a moment, until she realizes that she's now lying with her head in Madoka's lap.

Madoka is stroking her head, and stops when she sees lavender peering up at her.

"Homura-chan? I'm sorry, are you alright?"

She nods. "I'm—fine. I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me..."

Madoka hums softly, and she's gentle as she wipes the remaining tears from Homura's face. "How are you feeling? Can you sit up?"

"I..." she breathes out slowly. "Can... we stay like this, for a while longer...?"

"Take all the time you need, Homura-chan." Madoka continues to stroke her head, and she closes her eyes, taking comfort as she feels those small hands move across.

\\

The strike of midnight, and Madoka gathers her in her arms, before she presses a kiss on her cheek.

"Happy Birthday, Homura-chan," she whispers softly into her ear.

She curls her body closer. "Thank you... Ma-doka...?"

"Hm?"

"I... don't want to go..."

Fingers thread in her hair. "It'll be okay, Homura-chan. I'll be there with you."

She swallows, trying to push down that fear building in her chest.

An unfamiliar, different type of fear.

"Shhhh." Madoka kisses her head. "It'll be okay, Homura-chan. Let's try and get some sleep, okay?"

She nods, though sleep is the last thing on her mind.

/

It's a strange world, filled and entwined with what ifs and what could have beens.

The car ride is quiet, and Madoka is napping on her shoulder as she stares out the window.

Unintentionally, as she glances up, she somehow catches Tomohisa's eyes in the side view mirror. He smiles, and she quickly averts her gaze.

"Mama!" Takkun pounds his fist into his car seat, causing Homura to jump, and the vibrations wake Madoka up.

"What is it, Takkun?"

"Bathrooom!"

"Ahh."

"We just passed a sign for a rest stop," Tomohisa tells her.

"Alright, let's stop there for a bit." Junko briefly glances to the rear view mirror, "can you wait for a few minutes, Takkun?"

"I'll tryyyy."

"Good."

They continue driving, until Tomohisa points out the exit, and Junko signals and steers the car out of the highway.

Once parked in front of the small gas station, they all pile out of the car to stretch their legs.

"I'll take Takkun in first," Tomohisa says as he carries Takkun with him inside.

"Thanks." Junko turns to Madoka and Homura, and smiles at their sleepy faces. "Ahhh, I must be getting old," she groans as she tries to work out the kink in her back.

Madoka looks at her in worry. "Are you okay, Mama?"

"Well," Junko gently taps on her back with her fist, "I wouldn't mind a massage from you later. But," she straightens out, and walks towards them to slip her arms around their shoulders. "Let's go see what we can buy here; maybe they'll have something different than what we're used to."

"Okay, Mama."

She leads them both inside.

\\

They reach their destination by evening, and the first thing they do is check into the hotel reserved under Junko's name.

"Homura-chan?"

Homura stands in front of the window, staring at the city lights blinking down below. She turns as arms are slipped around her waist.

Madoka snuggles against her. "Mama asks what you would like to eat for dinner."

"Anything is fine," Homura murmurs softly.

"Are you sure?"

She nods. "Yes. I... have no preference."

Those small arms around her waist tighten ever so briefly, before Madoka pulls away to frown at her. "Homura-chan."

Her tone tells her that Madoka is once again upset. "Yes...?"

Madoka shakes her head with a small sigh. She trails one hand down to intertwine her fingers with Homura's. "This trip is for you," she says as she stares into Homura's eyes.

Eye-contact is broken as Homura looks away. "I... didn't—"

Madoka tugs her hand. "Don't you dare apologize, Homura-chan. You're not a burden—and you belong here, with us, with," her voice drops to a whisper, "—*me*."

Homura swallows, trying to push her tears back. "I—"

"Madoka? Homura? Have you two decided?"

Junko's voice reminds them that they're not alone. Madoka turns to her mother, hand gripping Homura's stubbornly, not allowing her to let go.

"Homura-chan," her eyes flicker over to her briefly, "wants to eat at a family restaurant," she finishes with a smile.

Junko nods as she swings her car keys in her hands. "Alright. We'll ask the front desk if they have any suggestions. Do you two need to freshen up first before we go?"

Madoka is reminded that she needed to use the bathroom before she had confronted Homura.

"Yes!" She dashes off to use the bathroom.

/

Christmas, and the streets are overflowing with couples walking underneath the light snow.

She doesn't remember much of her childhood here, and the small details to the decorations and the lights are all made from Madoka's memories.

Just like everything else.

Unabashedly, Madoka grips her hand tightly, swinging them as they follow after Junko and Tomohisa and Takkun.

"Homura-chan?"

She leans over to hear Madoka better through the buzz of the crowd. "Yes, Madoka?"

"Do you..." Madoka's eyes shift nervously, "...Do you miss, living here?"

Her walking slows down to a complete stop as she mulls over Madoka's words. "I... don't really remember. But," she glances to Madoka, before she shakes her head "...no, I don't, not really. You... weren't here..."

Madoka smiles as her cheeks flush pink. "We... should catch up to Mama and Papa..." She shyly tugs Homura forward.

\\

The next day, and her feet drag as she follows Madoka down the snow covered path.

Tall slabs of stone surround them, carved with family names that mark each grave.

Junko leads the way with directions to a certain plot of land. The closer they get, the more the weight in her stomach seems to increase. She grips Madoka's hand tightly, her own knuckles as white as snow.

"It'll be okay, Homura-chan," Madoka murmurs into her ear.

Her body shakes, and her breaths come out in rapid gasps.

Madoka gathers her in her arms, and she presses her face into Madoka's shoulder.

"I—" she chokes on her words.

"It's okay, Homura-chan." Madoka rubs her back, trying to calm her down. "You—"

She pushes away from Madoka. "I can't—" she shakes her head, tears now in her eyes. "I just—" she grits her teeth, and starts running in an aimless direction—to anywhere that's not here.

"Homura-chan!"

Even as Madoka calls out to her, the whispers in her ears call louder. She continues running, ignoring that painful tug around her heart as it tries to stop her in her tracks.

/

When she hears the soft crunch from footsteps in the snow, she freezes, trying to keep her breaths from giving away her location.

More footsteps, before things fall silent again.

She leans back against the wall, ignoring the chill that seems to have seeped into her body.

"Homura-chan."

She whimpers, and buries her face into her knees.

Seconds later, Madoka takes a seat next to her. She unwraps the scarf around her neck, and expertly winds the cloth around Homura's.

"Papa took Takkun back to the car to wait for us," she murmurs as she presses her shoulder against Homura.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles into her legs.

"We split up, to look for you. Mama's meeting us... there."

She pulls back, and her glasses are fogged over from her warm breath. "...Can't..." she licks her dry lips, "can't we just... leave...?"

Madoka takes her hands. She starts rubbing them to warm them up. "Homura-chan..."

"I—can't," she croaks out, hating how tears are once again in her eyes.

"...You can."

She squeezes her eyes shut. "I—can't!"

Instead of replying, Madoka moves to help Homura up. "Let's go, Homura-chan."

She shakes her head. "N-No—"

Strong hands grip her arms, and though Madoka is smaller than her—she's still strong enough to pull her to her feet.

"I'm here," Madoka tells her as she grips her hand tightly.

"I'm—"

There's a gentle hand cupping her cheek, and Madoka leans forward, resting her forehead against hers. "I'm here," she repeats.

She sucks in a shaky breath; she's shivering—but not from the cold.

"Let's go, Homura-chan."

A light tug, and she stumbles after Madoka as they once again walk down the snowy paths.

/

She stares at the ceiling; one lamp remains lit as Takkun still can't sleep without a night light.

But it's not like she can really see anyways; her glasses are neatly folded on the night stand, and she listens with half an ear at the gentle sounds of breathing in the bed nearby.

Madoka shifts under the blankets, and she can feel her body heat permeating through their clothes.

"Homura-chan...?" Madoka's breathy whisper tickles her neck, and she turns her head to see rose pink staring at her. A silent question in those eyes, and she blinks as one tear rolls down.

Gentle fingers brush the tears away.

Her chest still feels heavy—but also lighter.

She turns her whole body this time, and Madoka welcomes her in her arms. Kisses are pressed against her head, and she closes her eyes as she bunches fabric in her hands.

"I love you," she whispers softly.

Madoka's reply is instant. "I love you, too."

\\

Their suitcases are sitting by the door, and they're double checking to make sure that nothing has been left behind.

She nervously fidgets with her jacket ends, tugging and pulling at the fabric as she struggles to say the words.

Madoka gently bumps her leg. She glances over, and Madoka gives her an encouraging smile.

"Alright, we have everything?" Junko asks as she digs through her bag for her keys.

Homura's mouth opens, but no sounds spill out. She snaps her mouth shut and turns her head, her brow furrowed in frustration.

"Mama," Madoka calls out for her.

"Hmm?" Junko turns back to face them, immediately noticing how tense Homura seems. Her face softens, and she moves over until she's in front of them. "Is something wrong?"

Madoka places her hand on Homura's back. "Homura-chan... has something she wants to say."

"Ah." Homura glances over, but quickly bows her head when she sees Junko smiling at her. "I... j-just... uhm... w-anted... to s-say..."

She's still not looking when hands pull her close; warmth, and the sweet smell of flowers.

"Homura, do you remember what I told you the first time you came to live with us?"

Junko takes her silence to mean that she doesn't.

"'Welcome home.'" Junko tilts Homura's head up, forcing her to look at her. "The moment you stepped into our house, is the moment you became a part of our family." Junko smiles. "It's been, how many years now, hm? And you're—still shy around us," her hands move, and she fixes Homura's collar back into place. "This—is just another step closer to letting you heal, Homura."

Homura glances down, her eyes now concentrated on Junko's feet. She watches as Junko starts to step back, and finally takes that step forward.

She barrels into Junko's chest, earning her an oof as Junko braces for her weight.

"Th...ank you," she murmurs into Junko's jacket.

Junko returns the hug. "You're welcome, Homura."

/

"Okay, we'll see you then, Sayaka-chan."

Junko glances briefly into the mirror as Madoka slips her phone back into her jacket.

"They're boarding the train?" she asks as she turns her attention back to the road.

"Uh huh. They'll be there before us, but Sayaka-chan says that they'll probably get something to eat as they wait."

Junko nods. "We'll probably stop soon for lunch too."

Homura keeps her eyes closed as she remains leaning against Madoka.

Madoka knows she's awake though, and returns one arm around Homura's waist.

The ride continues, and Junko turns up the volume on the radio.

The next thing she knows, Madoka is shaking her awake.

"Homura-chan? We're stopping for lunch."

She blinks sleepily. "O...kay," she murmurs. She tries to open her eyes, but the sunlight makes them squint shut.

Madoka slips her glasses back on, before she gently tugs Homura out of the car.

She yawns, and hears Takkun whine from being woken up from his own nap.

Madoka smiles when she sees that a section of Homura's hair is sticking up from their car ride. She runs her hands through the tangled mess.

"Thank you," Homura mumbles, resisting the urge to flick her hair behind her.

Madoka blushes, finally remembering that they're in a public place. She removes her hands, dropping them to take Homura's hand instead.

"Let's... go, Homura-chan. We're being left behind..."

\\

She's once again nodding off when she hears Takkun clapping loudly.

It startles her awake, and as she waits for her heart to return to normal, Madoka presses her face against her neck, still half asleep.

"Are we going up, Mama?" Takkun asks as he taps on the window, smiling at the view of the mountain in front.

"We're going to head allllllll the way up," Junko replies.

He claps again.

Madoka lightly groans in protest.

"It'll still take a while though," Tomohisa tells Takkun. He points to the line of cars in front. "Other people are going up the mountain too."

Takkun leans forward in his car seat. "Everyone else is going up too?"

"Yup. Sayaka-nee-chan is already up there too."

Takkun maneuvers his body so that he can see out the front window. "Already?"

"Yes, she left before us," Junko says as she steers the car into the turn lane to start their ascent up the mountain.

Takkun turns his head to look out the side window again. "How long until we get up there, Mama?"

"Mm," Junko quickly glances to Tomohisa.

Tomohisa gives Takkun a smile. "Judging from the amount of traffic, maybe an hour."

Takkun slaps his fist into his car seat, causing Homura to jump from the sound.

Madoka lifts her head. "Takkun, you have to be patient." She pushes her bangs to the side to squint at him.

"Patient?" he echoes.

"It means that you have to wait," Tomohisa tells him.

He slaps his car seat again, and this time Madoka frowns when Homura jumps once more.

"Takkun, don't do that please."

His mouth opens, but he lowers his hands into his lap. "I'm sorry."

Madoka reaches out to ruffle his hair, and he giggles as he tries to bat her hands away. "It's fine. It's just kind of loud, especially when we're all sitting so close."

He nods his head in understanding.

Madoka stifles a yawn, before she once again leans heavily against Homura. She closes her eyes. "Wake me up when we're further up the mountain, Homura-chan."

"Okay..." She leans closer. "Uhm, thank you..."

Madoka smiles. She turns her head, her eyes opening to stare at Homura's profile as she gazes out the window. Takkun is still asking questions, but his voice is now quieter. Still smiling, she once again closes her eyes.

\\

Crisp air; light, fluttering snow.

She brushes her hair back, eyes staring at the snowy banks that flank their sides.

At the mountain peaks that can be seen in the distance.

She recognizes those.

Arms wrap around her waist as a weight is pressed against her back. "Homura-chan, Papa is making hot cocoa. Did you want some?"

She brings her hands up, gentle as she captures Madoka's hands in her own. "Madoka..." She draws in a deep breath that's released as white wisps escaping her mouth. "Do... you—"

They both turn when they hear crackle of loose gravel, and see one of the small buses for the mountain rolling closer. It stops across the street, right in front of the bus stop.

There's a hydraulic hiss, and the sound of clattering as they see familiar figures through the windows.

Madoka pulls away. "Ah, there's Sayaka-chan and everyone."

The bus drives off, and Madoka waves them over.

"Madoka!" Sayaka waves back when she sees her.

They wait for another car to pass, before they're dashing across the street to join them.

"How was the trip?" Madoka asks as they follow her to the cabin.

On cue, Sayaka shoots Kyouko a glare. "It—could've been a lot better, except someone here," she nods towards Kyouko, "forgot one of her bags at our transfer. We had to double back, and luckily someone had found it and turned it in."

Kyouko kicks the ground with her shoe. "I already apologized for that!" she grumbles as she places a hand on her stomach. "I'm so hungryyyyy."

Madoka blinks. "You didn't get lunch?"

Mami clears her throat, interrupting Sayaka's response. "Unfortunately, retracing our steps back to the other station took most of our time." She sighs. "If I had known this were to happen, I would have packed more than a light snack..."

"Ah..." Madoka glances around, noting their varying levels of disappointment. "Uhm, there's... cocoa, and we brought groceries and soup and things before we left home."

Kyouko takes off towards the cabin at the mention of food.

"Kyouko! You're going to fall—you idiot!" Sayaka yells as she chases after her.

"They're both going to fall," Homura murmurs as the three of them watch.

Madoka winces when Kyouko slips on a patch of ice just as Sayaka reaches out to grab her jacket. She's pulled down with her, and they land in a pile of tangled limbs and luggage.

Mami sighs, and turns to face Homura and Madoka. "Putting those two aside, how was your trip here?"

"Mm," Madoka smiles and gently pats Homura's hand. "It... went well." Her smile turns sheepish. "At least, it seems it went better than yours did...?"

Mami places a hand to her chin. "Well, it was... eventful, to say the least. Thank you again for inviting us, Kaname-san, Akemi-san, even though I know originally this trip was meant to be a family event." Golden eyes flicker to Homura, who is now staring into the distance.

Madoka shakes her head, and tugs Homura along as they continue to the cabin. "Not at all, Mami-san! Mama was actually pretty happy when she heard that you three wanted to come." She briefly glances to Homura. "The more the merrier."

"Well, regardless..." Mami lowers her eyes, "Kyouko admitted to me the real reason why they wanted to go on this trip... Ah."

Madoka turns to Mami in alarm when she sees her wiping her tears away.

"Mami-san—"

Mami laughs softly, and shakes her head. "No, it's—just, thinking about how lucky I am to have such sweet kouhai... I'm... a bit sad that we'll be separated in a few months."

Madoka reaches for her hands. "It's—okay, Mami-san! We'll definitely keep in touch! No matter what!"

It's Madoka's determined expression that banishes the doubts from Mami's mind.

"I..." She gives Madoka a teary smile. "Thank you, Kaname-san. I would... really like that."

Madoka nods. "I'll make sure that all of us will keep in touch."

"Thank you. Now," Mami gently pulls her hands away, only to rub her arms, "I'm not sure about you two, but I wouldn't mind having a cup of hot tea to warm up."

Madoka eagerly leads the way to the cabin, and Homura is there to catch her when she slips on the same patch that had taken Kyouko and Sayaka down.

"Be careful," Homura murmurs into her ear as she helps her up.

Madoka hugs her tightly. "Thank you, Homura-chan."

When they finally straighten out, Mami is already inside.

She gives them a knowing wink when they enter.

\\

For a while—for a moment in time, she forgets.

It's just—bunny slopes, and powdered snow brushed off their clothes from their tumbles; laughs and smiles, and pelted snowballs.

Contests to see who can ride down the fastest. More challenges to see who can make the biggest snowman.

Hot cocoa, and fire that pops and crackles as they warm their bodies from the outside chill.

She forgets—and forgets—but then they'll be outside, and familiar faces will pass.

Girls their age; faces she remembers, but can't place a name to, because even after all that time, she still couldn't be bothered to get to know them.

Their paths will cross, their gazes will lock, and suddenly, she's transported to the main hall, where rumoured whispers echo in her ears: a Goddess; their savior; the Goddess and her—

But Madoka will shake her, and she'll rouse from her memories.

And that other girl will blink, and then scamper away with a blush.

"Homura-chan?" Rose pink, filled with worry, and maybe it's the trick of the light, but perhaps there's more gold now, peeking through.

She shakes her head. "It's... nothing."

Madoka bites her lip, unconvinced.

"Homura! Madoka! Hurry up!" Sayaka waves at them, breaking their strange atmosphere.

"We should... catch up," Homura murmurs as she gently pulls Madoka along.

Small fingers, attached to that small hand grip hers tightly.

"Okay, Homura-chan."

It's a soft whisper, loud enough for only her to hear.

/

The last day of their trip, there's a snowstorm warning with a high chance that they'll have to remain at the resort for another day or two until the roads are plowed clear.

She finds it strange, the sudden change in weather.

When early morning rolls around, she sneaks out as everyone is busy sleeping. She uses her magic to keep her warm as a whirlwind of ice and sleet twists around her.

The world seems to be weakening; how much longer now?

She turns suddenly, eyes wide, and rushes back to the cabin.

Snow is piled around her, and even with her magic, she finds it hard to navigate as her legs continue to sink into pockets of snow.

Chilled wind whips her hair in aimless directions, and at one point her glasses are too fogged for her to see anything in front of her.

Yet—she barrels forward, because—

Her heart drops, plummets, when she sees pink contrasting against the bleak white of the snowstorm.

"Madoka!" Her voice is captured, and carried away by the loud howls, and she frantically rushes towards her.

She drops to her knees, hands immediately reaching, and drawing Madoka close.

"Madoka...?"

Eyelids flutter open just a crack, and Madoka gives her a gentle smile when she sees her. "Homu...ra...chan...?"

"I-It'll be okay," she whispers softly.

"...Y-ou...left me... a-lone, aga...in."

"I'm-s-sorry," she chokes out. "Y-You'll be okay..."

"I'm... c-cold, Homu...ra...chan...?"

She shuts her eyes in concentration, willing, trying to mold her magic to surround Madoka. Her breath catches when nothing happens.

"W-Why, won't—"

She grips Madoka tightly, knowing how weak her pulse is—how cold she is.

What happens to those that die in this world?

She shakes her head.

She knows there's a way to save her.

The seconds tick by, and the more she wavers, the more she can feel Madoka—slipping away.

"I'm—sorry," she whispers, right before she leans down, her lips seeking Madoka's.

The flow of magic is immediate, her touch breathing life back into Madoka's chilled body.

Madoka feels stronger—much, much stronger, and knowing this, warm tears trickle down her face.

\\

It's the first time that Junko yells at her in this lifetime, and she keeps her head bowed.

In shame; in regret and—

The blankets over her shoulders fall off as Junko holds her and Madoka close.

"Thank goodness you two are okay."

She holds Junko tightly, burying her face into her chest as the tears continue to fall.

"I'm sorry—" she sobs out.

Even without looking, she knows the hand around her waist is Madoka's.

"I'm sorry," she repeats once more.

/

As predicted, they stay an extra day.

The storm clears, leaving a wake of crisp, cold air to hang in its wake.

She can never wander off too far—straying just a little, and someone's familiar voice will be calling out to her—pulling her back.

She stares across, to the mountains that have sat in the distance ever since they first set foot on this resort.

They're clearer now.

"Homura-chan?"

Fingers wind around hers, and she turns as Madoka joins her side.

"We're leaving soon."

Those words twist something in her chest, and she keeps her eyes glued to ground as she tries to swallow her tears.

Fingertips gently brush her cheek, trailing down until they're touching her chin. Her face is tilted up, and Madoka stares at her—golden eyes and all.

Madoka smiles. "Let's go, Homura-chan."

"Mado—"

A finger is pressed to her lips. "Let's go, Homura-chan."

\\

They return, and as planned, they meet up with Hitomi for lunch.

She's quiet, and withdrawn, and everyone but Madoka assumes it's because of their little incident at the ski resort.

Before New Year's, and they spend a full day cleaning.

Her room is already spotless, and she joins Madoka in her attempts to clean her room.

They instead spend hours poring over pictures taken in this lifetime, and she quietly watches as Madoka touches each picture gently, watches as her golden eyes files away each precious memory.

The strike of midnight, and as Takkun sleeps on Tomohisa's shoulder, they place down the containers of osechi, and dig in.

Junko smiles, and sets four glasses on the table, before filling each with liquid coloured like deep amber.

"It's usually sake, but," Junko holds out her cup, nodding both to Homura and Madoka.

They share a look, and together, they each pick up their drink.

"Here's to..." Junko gives them another smile, "...new beginnings."

They all raise their glasses, bringing them closer for that clink of glass.

Junko downs her alcohol like water, and Tomohisa takes a polite sip to savour the taste.

The liquid burns both of their throats, and Junko laughs loudly at their reactions.

/

In the morning, they visit the temple to ring in the New Year, and Madoka all but drags her up the stairs as they fight with the crowds to reach the top.

"Homura-chan."

She shouldn't be able to hear her over the murmurs of the crowd, but she does.

Reluctantly, she lifts her legs higher, and they weave through to try and find the others that have already arrived.

Just as her foot sets down on the final step, she has the strangest urge to turn around.

Her fingers slacken, and Madoka is the one holding on as she sees a familiar building towering in the distance.

She feels a tug on her hand, and Madoka leads her towards the lines to where they can offer a donation before they make a wish.

She offers a 500yen coin, and goes through the motions of ringing the bell, of clapping her hands, of bowing her head.

But there are no thoughts in her mind—and there's no wish whispered from her lips.

\\

They're still separated from the others, but she doesn't care, and Madoka doesn't seem to mind.

They buy their fortunes for the year, and she almost crumples up her paper in frustration when she sees her draw. Madoka stops her by taking her hand, and then depositing both papers into her coat pocket.

She glares at the ground, angry tears prickling in her eyes, but Madoka is patient and understanding, and merely drags her along through the crowds.

Madoka sends a message to the others, that they'll head home first, and they join the lines of people descending the stairs to head back to the city.

She keeps quiet as they continue to walk back, and the closer they get, the more that sinking feeling in her chest increases.

The streets are empty, and she knows it's not because everyone is at the shrine.

She stops, and Madoka stops.

"Mado—"

Lips capture hers, and her words are cut off as hands roughly pull her close.

"Ma—"

Every word is swallowed as Madoka refuses to let her move away.

Her head lightens as the oxygen decreases, and when they finally part, they're both gasping for breath.

Madoka recovers first, slipping her arms around Homura's waist to rest her head on her chest.

"Homura-chan. It's okay."

"But—"

Madoka lifts her head, and the stern look in her eyes drops the protest from her lips.

Madoka's face softens into a gentle smile. "Thank you. I..." she closes her eyes, the smile never leaving her face. "I'm, satisfied, with what you have given me."

She pulls away, eyes opening, still smiling. She gently takes Homura's hand.

"Let's... go home, Homura-chan."

The words are still stuck in her throat.

She nods.

/

Snow falls, a light, white dust, drifting down to cover the streets of Mitakihara down below.

When they reach their destination, Madoka turns to her with a small laugh.

Gentle hands brush snowflakes away, and almost like a reflex, Madoka leans forward to kiss her lips.

She pulls away, but she's smiling. "It's... kind of strange, being shorter than you again," she murmurs softly.

She agrees.

Hand in hand, they continue inside.

At the entrance, Madoka's family is standing there, waiting.

Junko opens her arms, and Madoka drops Homura's hand to give her mother a bone crushing hug.

She continues to stand awkwardly to the side as Madoka repeats the process and hugs her father. When she reaches Takkun, she picks him up, and twirls him around, his loud giggle echoing and bouncing off the walls.

Once she sets him back down, as one, they turn to Homura, who flinches and averts her eyes.

"Homura."

She raises her head, and Junko has her arms held out.

"Come here."

It's warm inside, and the snow stuck to their clothes has melted. The snow on her shoes too, and she stares at the small droplets that have pooled on the floor.

"Homura-chan."

Madoka's voice snaps her attention back up. She ambles forward, body heavy, guilt draped over her shoulders.

Junko gathers her in her arms, and that familiar smell of flowers floods her senses.

"Thank you, Homura."

With wide eyes, she pulls away. The question sits on her lips, but Junko doesn't allow that word to slip from her mouth.

"For taking care of my daughter." Junko readjusts her collar back into place, before she smooths down the nonexistent crinkles on Homura's jacket. "I know she's in good hands."

Before Homura can respond, fingers are pulling at her cheeks as her face is stretched.

"I have always told you you looked better smiling, Homura."

Junko gives her last one grin, one last wink, before she drops her hands and turns to Madoka.

"Madoka." She waves her over, and obediently, Madoka moves to stand in front of her.

"Yes, Mama?"

Junko smiles, and places her hands on her shoulders. "You've... grown up, haven't you?"

Madoka nods. "I have, Mama."

Junko cups her cheeks, tears now gathering in her eyes. "I'm so proud of you, you know that, don't you?"

Madoka's lips quiver, and she finds it hard to respond. "Y-es."

"Mama, was always worried, you know? That... I wouldn't be able to raise you correctly." Junko laughs as she dabs Madoka's eyes with her sleeve.

"You, are my first; my baby girl." She grins, and leans forward to kiss Madoka's forehead. "I raised a good kid."

Madoka's face crumples, and Junko holds her tightly as she sobs into her chest.

"You're doing fine, Madoka. You—" Junko smiles at Homura, "you and Homura both. Even though Mama won't be there with you," she kisses Madoka's forehead once more, before pushing her away, "I will always be with you."

"Mama—"

Junko shakes her head. "Madoka, what I have always taught you?"

"...To always finish what I started."

Junko nods, and takes one step back to join Tomohisa's side. He slips one arm around her waist as the other holds Takkun tightly.

"You'll... no," Junko shakes her head again. "You're doing just fine. We will always love you."

Madoka nods, mouth pressed shut as she watches her family fade away. She can feel Homura by her side, and she turns to bury her face into her shoulder.

"...I'm sorry," Homura whispers.

One last sniffle, before she stands to her full height. "Let's... go home, Homura-chan."

Madoka is engulfed in white light, and she watches as the light expands, grows, blooms out. As Madoka's hair extends and extends. As that ever familiar white dress, with that ever flowing tail large enough to encompass the universe billows behind her.

Madoka turns to her, and so used to a shorter, smaller Madoka, she has to bring her eyes up to meet her gaze.

A steady hand is held out, and there's a shine from the band wrapped around her ringer. "Homura-chan?"

Her own hand shakes and trembles, but Madoka steps forward—slipping her arms around her waist.

"Home, Homura-chan."

She nods even as tears spill out.

\\

"Madoka...?"

"Hm?"

She rolls over to face Madoka, who is lying besides her. "...What... about...?"

Just the thought of those beady red eyes sends shivers through her body, and Madoka holds her close.

"Shh. It's okay. They're... well, they'll be busy for a little while."

Homura grips her tightly. "What—do you mean...?"

Madoka laughs softly into her ear. "Mm. Well, they... have their own reasons for the things they do. They weren't lying at least, when they said they were trying to reverse entropy."

"But—"

Madoka draws her in closer, eyes closing at the familiar feel of Homura against her. "It's okay. No matter what they do, there are still rules that they need to abide by. That's—" she exhales slowly, "that's why I couldn't completely turn into a Witch even after they had captured me. Not to mention," she trails her hand down Homura's back, earning her another shiver, but this time, for different reasons, "I knew that you'd save me."

"I'm—" She jumps when Madoka pinches her side.

"Homura-chan. Stop apologizing."

"But—"

Madoka shakes her head, "stop, please. If, anything, it should be me that should apologize."

"...Why—"

"I—... you gave up your happiness for mine... Your parents..."

She draws in a small breath. "Oh."

"I—"

"It's—fine."

And it really, really is.

Gone, is that fog in her mind when she thinks of her family. She remembers her parents, and after that, she remembers Junko and Tomohisa.

Takkun, and Madoka.

"It's fine," she repeats.

Madoka finally pulls back to look at her. "But, you know, it... reminded me, just how strong you are."

She blinks in confusion. "What... do you mean?"

Madoka brings her hands up to hold Homura's face. "Even... after what had happened, you never gave up. You were sick, but you held on. I always knew that you were stronger than you thought you were—even from the first day I met you."

Lavender shifts to the side to avoid Madoka's eyes. "I'm—not. I'm—"

"Thank you, Homura-chan."

"I couldn't—"

"...I saw my family again—" her voice cuts off and Homura turns to her in fear. Madoka smiles with teary eyes, and shakes her head. "...Thank you, for giving me the opportunity to say goodbye."

Homura is suddenly holding her tightly. "Y-You should'n't have had to say goodbye! You—should've—stayed there, with them! Why—why couldn't—you—just let me go?" she sobs out. "You—could've been happy, living your life as Kaname Madoka!"

Madoka gently strokes her hair. "I already told you, Homura-chan: Kaname Madoka doesn't exist anymore."

"She did! She existed—she existed—"

"I'm, Akemi Madoka, remember? Your wife."

"I—"

"I made my wish, Homura-chan. There's no way that I will regret it; I'm happy here, with you. Maybe... it's you that's not happy here, with me?"

"That's—impossible! I'm happy here, because Madoka is here—"

"Then—we're both happy here, Homura-chan."

"You—"

"Homura-chan, stay here, with me, please?"

"I would—never leave you—"

"I love you."

"I—love—you—"

Madoka hugs her tightly. "Thank you, for existing in my life. You're—everything—and more than I could ever ask for."

Her words catch in her throat, and she can only convey her feelings by hugging Madoka as hard as possible.

Madoka smiles widely. "I love you so much, Homura-chan."

/

It's hard, adapting and forgetting and remembering at the same time.

She has days when she wants to sleep; days where only Madoka can coax her into opening her eyes.

The others worry—that her entering the barrier had been a horrible plan all along.

Homura—seems—and feels like she has returned back to the Homura from long ago—but Madoka shakes her head, and reassures them that she's recovering.

She doesn't dream of what could have been—but of things that have happened, and of things that she had experienced.

Sometimes they're bad dreams. Sometimes, and more often, they're good.

It's slow—but they have all the time in the world.

\\

The hills are covered in powdered white; trails of footsteps and lines from sleds and skis and snowboards disappearing as snow falls in its place.

There's a race downhill, and Sayaka and Kyouko are at the forefront, shouting insults at each other as they move at breakneck speeds.

Crowds of other girls cheer them on, and each race, there's a new bet for a new winner; so far, it's tied, and it looks like the next race will be Sayaka's win.

Today, everyone is outside, save for two lone figures that are making their way down the Great Hall. It's still decorated with white marble—carpeted with red cloth—still lined with banners painted in pink and purple.

Still frozen in time, waiting for that wedding to continue before Madoka had been whisked away.

"Are you sure you're okay, Homura-chan?" Madoka stares at her in worry. "You're not too cold, are you?"

She shakes her head. "I'm fine. It's... really warm, actually." With her free hand, she gestures to the poofy jacket that Madoka has given her, to the lined clothes, to the scarf wound around her neck. "I'm more worried about you," she murmurs, noting with slight amusement that Madoka is still wearing her Goddess dress that is drafty in certain areas.

"I'm fine," Madoka says as she wraps her arms around Homura, "I have a personal heater, after all."

"Mm..." She unwinds her scarf, knowing that it's extra long, just for this purpose.

Madoka grins as Homura encircles the cloth around her neck, and the sight draws a small smile on her lips.

They continue moving, and unconsciously, she looks around, eyes taking in the decorations for their long awaited day.

The real ceremony had happened in their garden, and only the original magical girls from Mitakihara had been present.

Kyouko had performed the rites, and Nagisa had carried the rings in. As planned, Sayaka had walked Madoka to the altar, and when they had exchanged vows, Mami had wept in joy.

"They'll wait for however long until you recover," Madoka murmurs into her ear as she leans her head on her shoulder. "None of them say it, but they're all waiting for you."

She stops, and Madoka stops. "Madoka?"

"Hm?"

"Are—you really happy here?"

"Mm." She closes her eyes. She has memories of her past life, of everyone's past life. Of their could have beens, their possibilities, the people that they would've eventually become.

The people they turned out to be.

Her eyes open as she smiles. "Homura-chan. You know... maybe—living in that barrier was exactly what we all needed. Yes, I was happy there, with my family," she squeezes Homura's hand, "...with you. But, it reminded me why I made my wish in the first place. Everyone's living the best that they can. Nothing is guaranteed in life, and—we can only hope that we'll have a happy ending. Even—even if things are painful, they're why we can still hope for better. You... are the one that showed me this, Homura-chan."

She moves, until one hand rests against Homura's cheek.

"Homura-chan... it's...okay. You've worked hard enough, long enough. I've, already said goodbye. Mama, Papa, Takkun, they will always be with me. I know it's hard, but, let's walk forward, okay? Start our new lives as Akemi Madoka, and Akemi Homura."

She swallows heavily, hating how her old self shines through at the worst times. Madoka removes her glasses for her, and gently wipes the tears from her eyes.

"Homura-chan?" Madoka leans their foreheads together, and she stares into golden yellow that is brighter than any sun she has seen.

She still has regrets; still has that ball of self-hatred coiled in her chest.

But—it's smaller now, and the whispers aren't as loud.

"I like..." she licks her lips nervously, "I like, when you use... my last name..."

Madoka grins. "I like... using your last name, too, Homura-chan..."

Hands trail down and down, and Madoka's grin widens almost dangerously.

"There's... no one here, Homura-chan..."

She gulps as her clothes suddenly feel too warm. "W-Wait—"

The scarf around her neck no longer provides comfort, and she can't run because it's also attached to Madoka.

With wide eyes, she holds out her hands. "Wait—"

Madoka tackles her, and they land roughly on soft velvet. "I've waited long enough, Homura-cha**n..."**

AN: Yes, this is the end of 'to eternity'. Thank you for reading!